

Manzi Mazi
Kabotya

Illus

2

Make It Stop!

I'm Not Strong...
It's Just My Sword!



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Make It Stop! I'm Not Strong... It's Just My Sword! Volume 2 [Complete]

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2

Make It Stop!

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Chapter 27: Die, Crow!!!

In the grand hall of an unknown palace, a man raised his wine glass high. He was Vortigern, the great leader of Wanpurgis, the Order of the Black Star—an organization of dark magi.

“Now, everyone, let us feast!” he declared.

“Yeeeah!” Hundreds of people, clad in black, cheered as with one voice.

They drank liquor, laughed with their comrades, and enjoyed the assortment of foods laid out in the hall.

“How wonderful this is!”

“Long live our leader!”

The atmosphere felt jovial, with smiles all around. An unsuspecting outsider might’ve even wanted to join in. However—

“Now then, fellas, have your fill! Today, we celebrate the success of our terrorist operation!”

Yes, what amused them to the point of laughter was the collapse of their own country. The cities protecting the imperial capital had fallen, and the inner zone of the Lemurian Empire now faced the threat of the aetherborn. That thought made their meals all the more appetizing.

Putting arms around one another’s shoulders, the dark magi offered mutual encouragement, without a hint of hesitation or guilt.

“Bet those inner bastards are pissing their pants right about now!”

“The screaming and crying are only getting started!”

“Those nobles still think they’ve got it all under control? We’ll just have to give them a second helping to teach them the meaning of suffering!”

“We gotta keep up the good work!”

All members of Wanpurgis were from the outer zone of the

Lemurian Empire, where they lived every day in constant fear of aetherborn. They'd all committed themselves to making sure that the people of the inner zone felt that same dread.

"Enjoy this for the comrades we've lost too," Vortigern said, gazing at his men like a father who wished to protect his children—or, perhaps, like a king who cared for his people.

His eyes were full of affection and warmth. Nothing like the harsh gaze one might expect from a terrorist.

"Now..." he murmured, leaning back in a corner of the hall and pulling a document out of his breast pocket.

He held in his hand a summary of the battle in Salem—the only city that had survived the operation to destroy all of the Four Cardinal Cities—as reported by two of his seven most trusted officers, "Hellfire Karen" and "Nya of a Thousand Faces."

"I thought they'd gotten their asses kicked by that demon of a swordswoman, Iris of the White Blade, but..."

Vortigern read the document again with narrowed eyes. Shockingly, Iris's name was only mentioned toward the end of the report. Nya and most other members of the group had been slain—and Karen nearly so—by a completely unknown man.

"Crow, is it? What a piece of work," he muttered under his breath. "If *you* hadn't been there, the inner zone would've been plunged into an even deeper hell."

The thought that this so-called "hero" had achieved an unprecedented feat and prevented the full completion of their terrorist operation only fueled the fire in Vortigern's heart.

"I'll *crush* him," he vowed.

The enemy organization was like, "Kill him!"

His country's nobility were like, "Go fight a dragon and die!"

His own weapon was like, "SOULS!"

And Crow was like, "..."

Ladies and gentlemen, introducing our protagonist, the man who—

despite his popularity—has no allies whatsoever, Crow Titus!

Chapter 28: Don't Die, Crow!!!

At the Sirius City division headquarters of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights, Commander Fiana cast a puzzled look at the man before her.

“Prime Minister Superbius, I hear you ordered Crow—a sixth-grade knight—to hunt a dragon *by himself*. What’s the meaning of this?!” she demanded sharply.

Such an order *had* to have been a prank. And she didn’t approve of such distasteful humor.

“First you visit unannounced, then you issue a ridiculous order,” she continued. “A dragon?! It would take multiple elite knights to match such power. Asking a child to take one down alone is—”

“Silence, Commander Fiana. This is an order from the king himself. ♡” The prime minister thrust at her the mission order, which bore the emblem of the Lemurian Empire. “A request from His Majesty is absolute. Everything, from the date to the appointed members, must be strictly followed. Not even the captain himself, let alone a mere commander, can say a word against it. ♡”

“Ugh...”

It pained her to admit it, but the old fox was right. The Imperial Order of Magus Knights had been established by the royal family itself, after all. Though they now accepted requests from merchants and citizens, they’d originally served directly under the king. There was no way they could defy him.

“Oh dear, you seem discontented, Commander! Crow was far more obedient than you,” Superbius pointed out. “I just met with him, you see. He was surprised, of course, when I told him he was to fell a dragon, but when I said, ‘A dragon poses great danger to the people!’ he immediately agreed to do it! ♡”

“Of course he’d agree when you put it like that!” she protested. “You knew about his past, didn’t you? That’s why you said that!”

Seeing Fiana’s building rage, Superbius offered her a wicked smile. She was correct. Crow’s history was well known to the higher-ups at

the time of his knighting. They were fully aware that he was Iris's disciple and that he was a myth conqueror, capable of wielding cursed arms.

Of course, they also knew about the razing of his hometown at the hands of a dark magus, and how this tragedy had led him to take on the role of the "Condemner."

"Sir Crow is from the outer zone," Fiana said. "A commoner with no pedigree. To think you lot in the upper echelons would do this to prevent him from becoming another Iris..."

"Now, now, I would drop the disrespectful assumptions if I were you, Commander Fiana," Superbius interjected. "It's quite the opposite, you see. All of us, His Majesty included, simply want Crow to become a legend. That's why we requested that he kill a dragon on his own."

"A legend?" she echoed, puzzled.

"Oh, yes!" the prime minister exclaimed. "Our nation faces an unprecedented crisis! Aetherborn from the outside have breached our inner defenses, and much of the populace is a bit anxious! Why, we simply wish to give the people someone they can look to for safety! That's all!" In a sarcastic tone, Superbius added that "Crow! ♡" would be that someone.

"And so *that* is why we decided to enforce such seemingly outrageous conditions! It is only by overcoming adversity that men become heroes! ♡"

"Mere honeyed words!" she retorted.

"Ah, I *am* quite sweet, aren't I?" he remarked. "Now then, I should get going. Ah, what a pleasure it is to speak to a beautiful woman like you. ♡"

As the prime minister turned to leave, he declared he would come again. Fiana retorted that he should never come back.

Alone, she let out a heavy sigh.

She *knew* that the higher-ups wanted Crow dead. And then, on top of that, to claim that sending Crow to fight such a powerful aetherborn was for the sake of the people? Vile.

“Oh, Sir Crow. You’re stern, but more than that, you’re far too kind,” she murmured.

That wonderful man had believed in her hopeless daughter and had helped mend their mother-daughter relationship. Fiana’s heart ached with concern for him.

It was then that she made a decision.

“Missions from the king are absolute. If he says to kill a dragon alone, then it must be so,” she pondered. It was an incredibly harsh condition to set. However, the mission *didn’t* specify which equipment could be used, nor did it say that he needed to travel to the dragon’s location on his own.

In which case, she could still provide support.

“Sir Crow! As your superior, I will do what I can to aid you!” Fiana declared.

Now, in point of fact, *this* was how Crow’s answer to the prime minister had *actually* gone:

“You must fell this dragon for the good of the people,” the prime minister had said, telling himself, *There’s no way he’ll refuse now.* ♡

“Yes, sir!” Crow had said. But privately he’d been thinking, *Important people are scary! I can’t say no to them!!!*

Chapter 29: The Daughter-Lending Service

“I’m very sorry, Sir Crow,” Commander Fiana said, bowing her head.

The day after I’d been ordered to hunt down a dragon by the prime minister, we stood before Sirius City’s gates.

“I’m powerless,” she lamented. “I can’t offer much support for the mission they gave you.”

She looked incredibly dejected, tears pricking at her eyes.

“Your order states you must undertake this alone, but it doesn’t specify what kind of equipment you can use,” she noted. “Considering this, I thought of lending you a number of cursed arms, but...” Fiana lowered her voice before continuing, frustrated. “Superbius must’ve anticipated this. The warehouse where we keep aethereal arms was empty. An employee said that the prime minister’s lackeys took them all, claiming any surplus weapons should be kept in the capital in case of emergency. Furthermore, they tightened control over weapons with designated owners, and made it so even borrowing one from another knight requires permission from the capital.”

Sudden as it all had been, protesting openly was difficult. Monsters had invaded the inner zone, after all, and concentrating resources at the nation’s core was only natural. Tighter control over aethereal arms under such circumstances made sense.

“Between that and the timing of this mission, there’s no denying that all this is to harass you, Sir Crow. If only House Alithlai had more influence, I could’ve protected you.”

Fiana had been apologizing like this for some time now. What a nice woman she was!

Unconcerned, I placed a hand on her shoulder, looking sharp as sharp could be. “Please don’t worry, Commander.”

“Sir Crow...”

No, really. I truly didn’t want her to worry!

She (and the rest of the country, apparently) thought I was a “myth conqueror” or whatever it was, capable of using cursed arms, but I wasn’t! My cursed weapons were under control only due to the strange powers of Muramasa, the Black Reaper—this shitty-ass, body-controlling sword!

“And it’s not like they’re completely under control either. They’re always going on about something or another, and this stupid ‘Arash’ gun wants to make me kill myself. Why don’t you do something about that, huh, Muramasa?!”

“CURRENTLY IMPOSSIBLE. CONTROL ABILITY AT LIMIT. AM GROWING BOY.”

“‘Growing boy’?! Wait, does that mean if you keep eating souls, you’ll be able to control even more dangerous weapons?”

Well, *that* was good news! Just feed him more souls, and— Wait, no, that was *bad* news! I didn’t want the sword getting even better at controlling things! Wouldn’t that make it better at controlling *me*?!

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“TCH.”

“Did you just click your tongue at me?! You did! You clicked your tongue like you realized I’ve seen right through you!!!”

Damn this stupid bastard!

Anyway, considering all of that, I *definitely* didn’t want to end up with even more cursed arms, so I was glad they couldn’t easily give me any. Thanks, prime minister! What a bro (for this one thing only)!

Well, I couldn’t exactly tell Fiana that, so I just came up with something that fit the situation instead.

“Commander Fiana, cursed or not, aethereal arms are a precious resource. It’d be inappropriate indeed for me to hoard so many.”

“Still, for your protection, I wish I’d been able to provide you with at least one more.”

I’m telling you! Well, I’m not, but still! More weapons will kill me! Please, don’t pave my road to hell with your good intentions!

Overtaken by intense emotions, I found myself clutching the

commander's shoulders.

"S-Sir Crow?!"

"Again, please, don't worry. I'd much prefer it if someone else could use them to protect others."

Fiana stared at me, stunned.

Yeah! Give them to everyone else! If they sit in storage collecting dust because people are scared of being corrupted, they'll just end up in my hands! And said hands are very full with problem children right now!

That had been the mindset behind what I'd said, anyway.

"Oh, Sir Crow! You're so...!"

Wait, is she crying?!

Oh crap, was I gripping her shoulders too hard?! I mean, imagine some guy digging his fingers into your skin going, "I don't want your shitty equipment!" Maybe she was so shocked and upset that she was like, "Wow, you're so ungrateful! I've never met anyone so horrible!"

That's probably it, huh? Here she is, with the best of intentions, trying to help me out, and I just went and refused her like that.

Man, I really was a hopeless idiot with my feet permanently lodged in my mouth, wasn't I? I'd gone and said some inconsiderate shit and hurt Fiana's feelings. Good job, me.

I'm just...gonna go, I thought. I was genuinely grateful for her *other* good deed, though, so I wanted to thank her first.

"Commander, I am truly grateful to you for lending me a carriage. With it, I can head straight to the mountainous region where the dragon is said to be," I said, glancing back at the unicorn-powered vehicle behind me. "And thank you for sending your precious daughter to accompany me on this journey."

A peach-haired girl poked her head out of the carriage's curtains. Amazingly, the commander had appointed her daughter, Tiana, as my "caretaker" for the trip.

"Mama—I mean, Commander?" she said, her features filled with determination.

Hadn't she been trembling and going on about how scary heading out on a dragon-hunting trip was, just moments ago? What was with the sudden resolute look?

"I heard what Crow said," Tiana told her mother. "I'll be of help to him, I swear."

"Please do," Fiana replied. "With things the way they are, we don't know how long he has left to live."

Mother and daughter exchanged a firm nod.

Wait, what was that about my words? What does she mean, she doesn't know how long I have left to live?! Is it me, or do they think I'm horribly incompetent?!

Chapter 30: A “Bond” Is Forged

“All righty! Everything seems fine for now!”

Half a day had passed since they’d left the city. From the coachman’s seat, Tiana had been diligently scanning their surroundings as the carriage, pulled along by the unicorn, raced across the fields.

Aetherborn now lurked in the inner zone, but it was difficult to ascertain exactly where. So she’d taken on the responsibility of spotting them early and changing their course to avoid burdening Crow, who was resting inside the carriage’s cabin.

Rubbing her eyes, dry from exposure to the headwind, she continued her watch.

“Tiana,” Crow called out. “Maybe I should take over.”

“No way!” she snapped. “I’m taking care of you!”

“Hrm,” he grunted, unable to protest.

Secretly, Tiana was annoyed by Crow’s kindness. Even as he was about to engage in mortal combat, he was still worrying about others.

Just sit tight and conserve your strength! she thought. *You’re fighting a dragon, remember?! That’s the strongest aetherborn there is!*

Dragons had featured in the lore of various cultures since ancient times. They’d been portrayed in various forms, but not one of them had ever been described as weak. And so, in the present day, when formerly imaginary beings had come to life, dragons reigned absolute as the greatest threat to the world.

They didn’t specify which kind of dragon this is, but I mean, it’s a dragon! It’s probably some humongous, hard-scaled, fire-breathing flying monster. And he has to face it one-on-one...

Tiana could sense how awkward Crow felt about being the only one taking it easy. She couldn’t help but sigh at his restlessness.

You really should take better care of yourself, Crow!

She thought back on what her mother, Fiana, had said to him before they'd set off.

"If only House Alithlai had more influence, I could've protected you..."

The commander had profusely apologized for not being able to supply him with cursed arms. Surely they would've provided extra firepower to a myth conqueror like Crow.

Yet Crow seemed unfazed. "Cursed or not, aethereal arms are a precious resource. It'd be inappropriate indeed for me to hoard that many," he'd said. He'd even consoled Fiana!

And then he'd added, "I'd much prefer it if someone else could use them to protect others." Those words had made both mother and daughter want to cry. He'd essentially said he was willing to sacrifice himself to protect complete strangers!

Crow, whose hometown had been razed by a villain, had sworn to never allow such a tragedy to befall anyone else. His devotion to protecting others was tragically extreme.

Crow... How can I get you to love yourself more?

Just as Tiana was about to ask that question out loud, the unicorn pulling the carriage whinnied.

Startled, the young knight looked ahead to see a group of ten or so giant pig aetherborn—trolls—emerging from the bushes.

Dammit! I got distracted!

Tiana inwardly cursed at herself. She'd *just* vowed to regain her motivation! What a mess she was! The young girl despised her own inadequacy.

"Unicorn! Quickly, change the path!" she commanded—but it was too late.

The trolls were already charging at the carriage with thudding steps, their vigor belying their massive size—over twice that of a human. "Groooooar!"

"Damn!" Avoiding them was no longer an option. Resolute and knowing she had no choice, Tiana moved to activate her own

aethereal arm.

Before she could, however—

“Embrace your doom, vile fiends!”

A dark shadow rushed forth from within the carriage. Reaching for his sheath, Crow leaped at the group of enemies. “Haaah!”

With a single flash of his blade, too fast for the human eye to follow, multiple trolls were cut in half. Keeping up the momentum, Crow continued his assault. He threw his vampiric knives in a frenzy, restrained the enemies with his demonic chain, and slashed, slashed, slashed at them with his deadly black blade.

“Grah?!” The screams of the aetherborn came one after another. The sight of the trolls tripping over themselves to flee as fresh blood splattered everywhere was almost pitiful.

“Die,” Crow said coolly, relentless in his pursuit as he mercilessly cut them down.

Stained in the blood of his enemies, he looked like a god of carnage. Seeing him in a crazed frenzy like that saddened Tiana even more.

What kind of man are you really, Crow?

A martyr, risking his own life for the sake of others—and a fiend, a frenzied demon when it came to cutting down evil.

With both of those qualities, he seemed the very embodiment of knighthood.

Still, if he continued down that path, Crow was certain to meet his doom.

None of that is an excuse to self-destruct like this!

Such a sorrowful existence was too much for her to bear, and Tiana was overcome with the urge to hold him close.

But she couldn't. She wasn't fit to stand at his side. She'd only drag him down and further expose him to danger.

“Oh, Crow...”

Vexed, Tiana could do nothing but watch.

At the same moment, however—

Whaaaaaat?! Why is Tiana looking at me like that?! I'm doing my best over here! Don't give me those sad eyes!

She had it all wrong, of course.

Martyr? Fiend? Yeah, no. Not even a little bit.

The thing he'd said about wanting others to use the cursed arms? He just didn't want to be the one to do it.

And all the determination to hunt down these trolls? A mere combination of Muramasa taking over, and him misunderstanding what she'd said about taking care of him. *Wait, she's taking care of me?! Man, she must think I'm totally helpless! I gotta do something! What kind of man would I be if I didn't?!*

That weird assumption was the only reason he'd even wanted to try at all.

The crossed wires from both sides only got more and more tangled.

Raaaaaar! Crow thought. Watch me, Tiana! I'm cutting them real good! I can do this!

Oh, Crow! Tiana thought. What an incredible aura you're radiating! If you keep moving like that, your body will break!

He was struggling for no reason. She was sad for no reason.

I need to do better!

I need to support him!

Thus did they bond over the completely wrong things.

"I can't have Tiana worrying about me! I gotta push myself harder!" he said.

"Please, don't push yourself so hard! Oh, I have to be there for him!" she said.

What an imbroglio!

Chapter 31: Infatuation (Starring Tiana!)

The inner zone was vast. It had a great number of cities, villages, lakes, and even mountains.

With how vast it was, one would have thought that more of the people who lived in the outer zone would be allowed in, but no. If people were simply allowed in and went on to have many children, it could easily lead to a shortage of land. Keeping entry difficult was the only logical decision.

In any case, according to the mission papers, the dragon in question had made its stronghold in the Luna Mountains. Accordingly, we'd made our way to the foot of the mountain range.

A grisly sight awaited us there.

"What the..." Tiana, my traveling companion, muttered in astonishment.

Before the two of us lay the remains of a completely ravaged village.

"Tiana, is this place...?"

"Yeah," she cut in. "People in the inner zone have a lot of free time, see. There are quite a few who enjoy mountain climbing as a hobby. A village had been established at the base of the mountains for such people, but..."

That village was now entirely gone.

Every building had been burned to ashes. Numerous massive claw marks were etched into the ground. Not a single villager remained.

Tiana's hand balled tightly into a fist as she looked over the desolate scenery.

"What the hell? The dragon's already obliterated this place! What point is there in sending Crow in now, alone, if not to use the dragon as a means to kill him?! Are they stupid?!" she shouted angrily, cursing the royal family and the prime minister.

Tiana had called herself worthless and sulked over being weak, but she still wanted to be a knight.

I was pretty damn furious too. “This is ridiculous,” I agreed.

Looking at the stone buildings, melted beyond recognition, and the giant claw marks several meters wide, I thought, *What the actual fuck?! How big and strong is this thing?!*

How the hell was I supposed to kill something like *this?!?*

Wait wait wait wait wait, I knew that dragons were the strongest of aetherborn, but I mean, I’ve managed to survive so much carnage! Under Muramasa’s control, I’m pretty strong! I thought I’d be fine!

I knew I was extremely powerful when I went into murder mode. Yes, my muscles would scream and my bones would nearly fracture, which kind of put a damper on it, but still! I’d won every battle so far!

So I’d been like, you know, “Eh, maybe I can actually win against a dragon too,” but—

Th-This is insane! I’m definitely toast this time!

Prime minister? More like prime *sinister!* What the hell had he gotten me into?!

Oh man, what do I do now? I wondered, realizing I’d essentially been given a death sentence.

My hands were shaking. Honestly, I just wanted to run away.

But Tiana told me that refusing a request from the royal family can be punishable by death!

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place! No way out!

Damn it! Do I just resign myself to becoming a wanted man and bolt?!

I mean, that sounded safer than going kamikaze on a giant-ass dragon.

Welp, that’s it. Feels bad to do it after coming so far, but whatever. I’m outta here.

Or I would’ve been, if Tiana hadn’t tightly clasped my trembling hand.

“Crow... You’re angry too, aren’t you? At the royal family’s cruelty. At the dragon’s tyranny.”

“I am.” *Wait, what?*

No, no, hold up a second! Yeah, I was mad at the royal family and the prime minister and everything, but I didn’t give a shit about the dragon!

And my hands were shaking from fear, not anger!

Sure, it was pretty sad to think about all the villagers who’d been attacked, but I was from the outer zone! People got eaten by monsters *all* the time! I was pretty damn used to it!

Also, I was no saint, so I had no intention of getting angry and risking my life to kill a dragon on the behalf of a bunch of people I’d never met.

“It’s just like you to maintain your composure even after seeing all this terrible destruction. We haven’t known each other for long, I realize, but I know you, Crow. You’re the kind of man who would throw his own life away for the sake of peace.”

Uh. No? I like my life where it is, thank you! I had *zero* inclination to do that! I was a lowly peasant who’d much rather have enjoyed the comfy benefits of peace than risked my hide for it!

I guess I don’t come across that way when I’m in Condemner mode, but I don’t think I’ve ever acted self-sacrificing in front of Tiana. Have I?

I’d probably just put on a cool face and said something punchy. I couldn’t remember, really.

“At any rate, Crow, it’s quite late today already. You must be tired from the battle on the way here too. You should rest up for tomorrow,” Tiana added, gripping my sleeve tightly.

Rest up for tomorrow? Was I gonna have to fight the thing tomorrow?!

Wait, no! I don’t wanna fight! I wanna run!

That was it. I couldn’t afford to keep up appearances anymore! Enough with the cool act! I was about ready to pathetically yell at Tiana to please let me escape, but—

“It’s not like you can escape, either way. If you abandon this mission, surely the royal family will fault your mentor, Iris, for it.”

They will?!

No, no, that was bad! Really bad! I didn’t want Iris to get in trouble because of me!

Which...meant I couldn’t really turn tail, didn’t it? I *had* to fight it.

“You’re right, Tiana. I think I’ll rest.”

And that’s the story of how I had no choice but to fight a dragon to the death next morning. Great. Just *great*.

CONTENT WARNING: The following scene contains a depiction of sexual assault that may be upsetting to some readers. Please use personal discretion if you are sensitive to content of this nature.

“You’re sound asleep, huh?”

By Crow’s bed, in the flickering light, the pink-haired young knight, Tiana, watched over him as he slept.

After they’d arrived at the ruined village, the two found a nearby cabin that was still standing and decided to make it their lodgings for the night.

Less than an hour later, after eating the meal Tiana had prepared, Crow had fallen fast asleep. He must’ve been exhausted, she figured.

Gently, she approached his bed as he slept soundly.

“You look so peaceful, sleeping like that,” she said with a soft chuckle, gently stroking his glossy black hair. “It’s cute, what with how stern you usually are.”

Looking at him like this, he seemed like a perfectly ordinary young man. Nothing like the war god he turned into on the battlefield.

Tiana found this both funny and sad.

“You’re just a kid my age. What do you think you’re doing?”

Crow fought so hard he might break, putting the destruction of evil and the bringing of peace to everyone above his own life. And the thanks he got for living heroically was the disdain of the royal family, who were now trying to erase him entirely.

Still, he didn't shy away from hunting down a dragon as they'd instructed, resolving to face his duty without fear.

"You're such an idiot," she murmured.

Upon seeing the overwhelming destruction the dragon had wrought upon the village, he hadn't so much as flinched. Instead, his fists had trembled in anger.

That'd been when Tiana had understood he'd likely always be this way.

"You have a few screws loose, you know? Even if I told you to cherish your life, you wouldn't listen, would you? At the first sign of anyone's suffering, you'd just rush to them, right?"

No matter what hardships awaited him, this broken Condemner would face them, even if he had to fight empty-handed.

"Crazy bastard," she muttered.

Tiana moved to straddle him, cupping the back of his neck with her fingers.

"It's your fault that my heart's a mess. So...you need to take responsibility, get it?"

Slowly, she leaned over and pressed her lips onto Crow's. A sweet sound echoed softly in the dimly lit room.

"Mm... Oh, I did it... It's all your fault, you know," she said, smiling bitterly at the absurdity of her own words.

She couldn't help it, however. The truth was undeniable.

Tiana had fallen hopelessly in love with this man who constantly put his life at risk to fight with everything he had.

"If you were more of a mechanical executioner, I wouldn't have fallen for you," she murmured. "But no, you walked around the city with me. You helped me mend my relationship with my mother. You

told a nobody like me that I protected your heart. You said being with me calms you down!”

Their time together had been short, but it had been more than enough. Looking back at the countless memories of tender, caring moments they’d shared made her heart swell.



Crow might have been a broken man, but he'd never lost the humanity in his heart. Tiana knew that, at his core, he was gentle.

"Crow..."

And that was precisely what had attracted her to this man, whose

heart had been irreparably broken when his hometown was burned down by an evil villain. To this man, who seemed as though he might burn to ashes in a second if she so much as looked away, she'd offered her heart.

"I don't want to weigh you down," Tiana said quietly. "I won't get in your way. I may be weak and stupid, but I don't want to hold you back."

She had no intention of suggesting that he should forget his hatred, stop helping others, and focus solely on her. No, that would have been shameful.

Her love would stay locked away, deep in her heart.

"So, Crow..."

Tiana had made up her mind—she wouldn't ask anything of him. She would devote herself to him from the shadows.

Resolute, she reached for his clothes.

"We don't know if you'll come back alive from the battle tomorrow, right? It would be so sad for you to die without leaving anything behind," she said.

How tragic it would be if the man she loved vanished from this world without a trace!

She couldn't allow that to happen. Even if she couldn't help him fight, even if she was weak and foolish, she wouldn't sit idly by and let things end like that.

And that's why—

"Please sleep," she whispered. "I'll take your seed."

With that, she turned off the bedside lamp.

As darkness embraced them, she gently took the man she loved in her arms.

"Hngh," he groaned. *Huh? There's something soft wrapped around me... It smells nice...*

Having misunderstood everything, Tiana went wild.

Indeed, her image of Crow was a complete fabrication. He wasn't so passionate that he might burn out. Gentle? Not even a little. No, he'd just acted like a big shot! In reality, he was a worthless idiot, hopelessly cursed by his sword!

"Ngh?" Is this, like, a huge marshmallow? Mm, maybe I'll take a bite...

In the middle of the night, Tiana yelped loudly, no thanks to a certain half-asleep moron's actions.

"Oh, Crow, Crow! ♡ Even in your sleep, you accept me! ♡"

Coming from the man she loved, even pain felt like a blessing. Unstoppable, she raced to the finish at full speed.

Despite saying she didn't want to weigh him down, her very nature was gravity itself.

"Zzz, zzz?!" Hngh?! What's this?! It feels kinda good?!"

"Oh, Crow, Crow, Crow, Crow! ♡ If you're ever injured and can no longer fight, I'll take care of you, okay?! ♡ Forever!"

In the darkness, their two silhouettes (one-sidedly and explosively) became one.

Alongside this clueless idiot of a man, the young girl—her fevered brain overflowing with lewd thoughts—sped to her limit!

It was the birth of the worst love story *ever*.

And thus did an idiot pink degenerate burst onto the scene!

Chapter 32: Rising Curtains

And now it's morning!

Rise and shine, me!!!

Good morning one, good morning all!

It's me, Crow! The guy who was about to go fight a huge-ass dragon to the death!

Man, I thought a coward like me would've had nightmares about my ass getting killed and so not been able to sleep, but I snoozed like a baby!

I felt weirdly satisfied and my skin was positively *glowing*! I felt great! I wonder why that was...

What a mystery! I must've had a really nice dream!

"Oh my, Crow, you're awake! ♡" Tiana greeted me.

Huh. She looks more attractive for some reason.

She was wearing an apron and looked like she'd been cooking, so she had this young wife aura to her.

"How are you feeling, Crow, dear? Tee hee, you were sleeping, and you still were so... Hee hee hee... ♡"

I was so...? So what? Also, did she just call me "dear"?

"Tiana, are you all right?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, I'm perfectly fine! Never mind that. Here, I'm just about done with breakfast! Eat up!" she commanded.

Hell yeah, breakfast! I'm hungry as hell for some reason! Wow, look at the length of this sausage! This must be, like, ten centimeters long! It looks great, Tiana!

"Hmm... On second glance, it looks so small now that I know one three times as long... ♡"

Wow, she had a sausage that long?!

“Oh, I would love to try that,” I said.

“You want to try your own...?! I mean, if you bend really hard... Wait, no! What kind of degenerate fetish is that?!” she exclaimed, beet red for some reason. “Oh crap, thinking about it gave me a nosebleed!”

Holding her nose, Tiana rushed off to the bathroom.

What the hell?

“Unfortunately, this is as far as I can come,” Tiana said.

After breakfast, we had arrived at the bottom of the Luna Mountains so that I could begin my ascent to fight the dragon. Tiana couldn’t accompany me any further since, as the mission specified, I had to fight the creature alone.

“The document is cursed, see, so disobeying the terms would result in immediate failure. If there were anything else I could do to help you, I would...”

Aww, Tiana! What a sweetheart!

In her place, I’d definitely have refused to come anywhere near a mountain range where a dragon was lurking. I mean, it’s scary as shit! And it’s not like she’d die for abandoning me to my fate.

Instead, she’d been nothing but generous to me. I was so grateful!

“I thank you, Tiana. You have truly been a great help,” I said, putting on my perfect hero face and taking her hand. I had to be sure to thank her properly now, since who knew if I’d ever get the chance again? “I will never forget what you have done for me. It is thanks to your help that I can give my all in this fight.”

“Oh, Crow... ♡”

Seriously, though, thanks! You’ve been a huge help!

It was probably thanks to her that I felt so good.

“SOUL... SMELL EXQUISITE SOUL!” the sword at my hip exclaimed.

Muramasa had never had such an extreme reaction, which

probably meant the dragon was, like, terrifying. And I *really* didn't wanna go find out.

"EAT MASSIVE SOUL... EVOLVE!"

I'm sorry, what? Did it just say "evolve"?!

It was a sword! What did it *mean*, it could evolve?! Inanimate objects couldn't do that! Quit dreaming, dammit!

"INANIMATE OBJECT DISCRIMINATION!"

"It's the truth, all right?!"

Well, I mean, yeah, it was an aethereal arm, and they *did* have weird properties I couldn't really wrap my head around, but *evolve*? Really?

Now I was curious. But also, I had a dragon to fight, so I'd worry about that after.

Welp, gotta do what I gotta do, I guess. I don't wanna cause Iris trouble by blowing this mission. And, you know, I don't wanna die.

This time, I was gonna give it all I had.

With an even sharper gaze than before, I turned to Tiana to say my goodbyes.

"I'll be going, then," I said.

"Right. Please, come back for us, Crow, dear! ♡"

Huh? Who's "us"? Oh! Must mean Commander Fiana's worried too! So I gotta come back for both their sakes! Yeah!

Why was she waving at me with one hand and rubbing her belly with the other, though?

Indigestion from all that sausage?

"SOOOOUL!"

"Stoooooooooop! What the heeeeeeeell?!"

I'd started climbing the mountain thinking, *Man, I'm gonna take my time*, but Muramasa wasn't having it. A few minutes into the climb, my body had begun a mad dash up the mountain, running as fast as it could like some sort of military drill from hell.

Wheezing and panting, I cried out, "I'm gonna die! This stupid jerk of a sword is gonna kill meee!" Then, to the sword, *"Dude, my heart's gonna explode! You do know that once we find the dragon, shit's gonna get serious, right?! Right?!"*

"VESSEL STAMINA GOOD! TRUST!"

"No, no, no! No 'trust'! *Worry*, damn you!"

I mean, to be fair, I did seem to find the strength to whine while dashing up a mountain at top speed, so there was that, but still!

"Dammit! It's *your* fault these past few weeks have been nothing but going all out! Obviously, I've built muscle, but jeez!"

Still, wouldn't it have been better to conserve my energy for the upcoming battle? We didn't really know much about the target, and Tiana had said that some dragons could even cast spells! Just mindlessly slashing away at it could get us caught off guard. All that stamina he was making me waste running around could've been put to better use figuring out what kinda skills our enemy had!

"VESSEL! MOTIVATION MAXED! EXCITED!"

"Yeah, it better be fucking maxed! I'm gonna *die* if it isn't!" *Man, I don't wanna use my peaceful brain cells for this. My combat motivation is basically nonexistent..*

"EXCITED! EXCITED!"

Whether or not it agreed with my reasoning, however, Muramasa allowed my feet to slow down a bit. That was probably the first time it had actually listened to me! *Maybe it'll be willing to go along with another request*, I thought.

"Hey, Muramasa, don't you think a total weakling like me isn't fit to be your vessel? Why don't we part ways after this battle, eh?"

"NEGATIVE. MINE. FOREVER."

"What do you mean, 'negative'?" I didn't want to be with this

thing *forever*! That sounded like hell!

I'm gonna tear you off of me someday! Just you wait!

“Listen here, you bloodthirsty sword, I don’t like fighting! I wanna take it easy and, like, fall in love, or something! One day, I’m gonna have a devoted wife and we’re gonna have a baby and everything.”

“ALREADY DONE.”

“Say what?”

The hell was the dumb thing going on about? I still had my v-card. Hell, I hadn’t even kissed anyone yet!

Wanting an explanation for that weird statement, I demanded, “Hey, what do you mean by—”

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOAR!”

Deafening explosions echoed from the mountain’s summit, interrupting my interrogation of the piece of trash sword.

A massive black shadow descended upon me.

“What the *fuck*?”

Look, I’d seen the claw marks back at the village, so I knew it was gonna be big. But *this*?

“That’s humongous!”

A black dragon, over three hundred meters long, glared down at me with its red eyes.

“GROOOOOAR!”

Eeeeeek! The thing looked *really* mad, like “How dare you step into my territory!” mad!

“M-M-Muramasa, we can kill this thing, right?! Right?!”

“YES!”

“Whoa, really?!”

“IF YOU TRAIN FOR A YEAR. YES.”

“Wait, that’s not a yes! What the hell?!”

And that’s how Crow died!

Thanks for reading, everyone!!!

(To be continued, actually.)

Chapter 33: Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens

Tiana, waiting at the foot of the mountain, was absolutely stunned by the appearance of the black shadow.

“No way...”

Normally, dragons were approximately a hundred meters in length, but that colossal beast was easily more than three hundred.

Three times the average. Far outside the curve.

“That size, those black scales... That’s one of the Seven Calamities!”

That terrifying moniker rang painfully in the back of Tiana’s mind.

In the thousand years since aetherborn first appeared in the world, there had been seven who were deemed such a peril, so impossible to contend with, that they’d been sealed away.

Those creatures were known as the “Seven Calamities.” Hundreds of magus knights of old had sacrificed their lives to finally contain them.

“There’s no mistaking it. That’s definitely one of those beasts! Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens! How?! Why is it here?!” she exclaimed, nonplussed.

Only the king was supposed to know where the Seven Calamities were sealed, in order to prevent them from being accidentally released.

“No way, right? His Majesty wouldn’t have unsealed that dragon just to get at Crow, right? That wouldn’t happen. Would it? I mean, setting it free could kill even His Majesty himself...”

So what *was* that thing? Not Nidhogg, but something else entirely?

Or was the king *that* much of an idiot?

She just couldn’t wrap her head around it. Not that it mattered—if Crow didn’t kill that monster, his life would most certainly be forfeit.

“Please, Crow! Don’t die!”

It was all Tiana could do to pray for his safety.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!! Shit, shit, shit, shit shit shit!
Nooooooooooooo!!!

One minute after encountering the massive-ass dragon, I was *booking* it across the mountainside like a bat out of hell.

Up I went, and down I went, unleashing the chain to help me vault over dead trees, dashing across the Luna Mountains without a moment’s rest.

Because, well, if my legs hesitated for even half a second...

“GROOOOAR!”

With a deafening crash, the ground on which I’d just been standing on moments ago was torn apart.

The enormous dragon kept swiping at me with its massive claws, flying low, relentlessly coming at me.

“GRRR! GROOOOAR!” the beast bellowed, apparently enraged, yet also seeming to enjoy the chase.

I felt like a cockroach being chased around by a cat. My face was pretty much frozen in fear. I was only staying silent so as not to waste oxygen, because otherwise I would be screaming *all* over the damn place.

“*Hey! Muramasa! Are you sure we’re gonna be fine?!*” I asked the stupid sword, still in its sheath.

Running away hadn’t just been my choice (not that there had been another choice). Muramasa had wanted to do it too. Since the intentions of both puppeteer and puppet (the latter, sadly, was me) happened to coincide, I felt a lot lighter. And so, somehow, I’d managed to keep evading it, but...

“*I’m talking to you, dammit! We’re gonna get ourselves cornered at this rate!*”

“*SOUL! SOUL! SOUL FOUND!*” Muramasa shouted out suddenly.

As I wondered what the hell it was going on about, I saw a large monkey-like aetherborn just ahead of us.

“Ooh, ah?!” the ape shrieked, scared shitless of both me, running full speed straight at it, and the black dragon chasing after me. (Sorry about that!)

I think it was called a “shoujou” or something like that. And why was Muramasa going after something else while we were in the middle of being chased by a dragon, anyway?!

As I pondered this inexplicable mystery, my hand reached for the sheath at last.

Huh?!

And in a flash, with one powerful motion, the ape, crying out in confusion, was bisected at the waist.

With a face full of fresh blood and monkey torso, the dragon let out a shocked roar. Distracted from its game of cat and mouse, it took a surprise direct hit to its eyes and writhed in agony, creating an opening.

Wait, is this what Muramasa was going for?!

What incredible combat tactics! Hats off, sword! Even if it only ever thought about satisfying itself without a single care for how much it wrecked my body in the process, it really *did* come through during combat, huh?

“COMMENCE COUNTEROFFENSIVE!”

My body turned sharply around and lunged at the dragon!

“Haaaaaaah!”

“GROOOOOAR?!”

Leaping onto the black dragon’s back, I began stabbing it in a frenzy. Its scales were unbelievably tough, but after repeated thrusts with the tip of the blade, finally, an arc of fresh blood gushed forth.

“GRAAAR!”

The dragon frantically spun in a cone, trying to shake me off—to no avail! Anticipating this maneuver, Aethon the Sable Tormenter

shot out of my left sleeve. The black chain coiled endlessly around the dragon's neck and held me firmly in place, like a mounted soldier.

Next, my daggers—crafted from Dáinsleif, the Dark Thirst—came flying out of my coat pockets and plunged into the various stab wounds Muramasa had left. The dark blades absorbed the dragon's blood, giving me a surge of power, thanks to Dáinsleif's ability to use the blood of its enemies to transfer strength to its wielder.

“GRRRRRRRRR!” the dragon growled, the sound taking on a different tone.

It was like its perception of me had changed. Until now, it'd treated me as a pest, a nuisance, but now it saw me as a foe capable of killing it, regarding me with such rage that it sent chills down my spine.

Um, Mr. Dragon? I'm just saying, but I'm not actually doing anything, okay?! All my movements are Muramasa's doing, and the chain and daggers also just came out on their own, okay?! So don't be mad at me! Think of it as a child's prank, be a dear, and die, all right?!

Which it didn't, of course. Instead, it just shot a murderous glare my way.

My pants wouldn't survive much more of this unscathed.

“Muramasa! Hurry up and finish this! We can't fight this thing forever!”

“YES. IMMEDIATE OBLITERATION!”

This overwhelmingly favorable situation was nothing short of a miracle. Thanks to the surprise attack blinding the dragon, I'd managed to position myself somewhere its claws couldn't reach and continue my assault.

Still, it wouldn't last forever. Muramasa knew this and pulled Arash, the Death Shot, from its holster.

Its recoil was staggering, and it was far too eager to try and make me kill myself every time. But in terms of firepower, there was nothing greater.

Pointing it at the dragon's back, I readied my finger over the trigger—

“GROOOOOOOOAR!” the black dragon bellowed, taking off into

the skies.

With a single flap of its wings, it soared hundreds of meters, and the second flap lifted it close to the clouds.

Such extreme acceleration sent my body slamming into a wall of air.

“Ugh!” I groaned as every bone in my body began to crack. My flesh was crushed, my veins torn, my organs twisting beneath my skin.

Blood gushed forth from beneath my eyes, painting my vision a deep red.

What? Huh?

It’d taken but an instant.

All the dragon had needed to do was flap its wings with all its might. And I, attached to it via the chain, had turned into a lump of meat.

That was how vast the gulf was separating it from ordinary creatures. With my body torn, I fully comprehended just how little of a chance I’d ever stood.

“VESSEL?!” Muramasa’s scream reverberated in my soul.

Wow, it sounds so worried about me. Would be nice if it did that more often.

That dazed thought marked the beginning of my personal hell.

“GROOOOOOOAR!” roared the king of the skies, furious at me for daring to defy him.

It took off flying in an erratic pattern, at super speed. I groaned, my every sense assaulted by the wild, deadly acceleration.

Again I crashed into the air, and the bones on my face, bearing the full impact, shattered.

My organs reached their limit, and a sickening squelch like water balloons popping echoed underneath my skin.

The catastrophic wounds nearly drove me unconscious, but at that moment the pain of another organ tearing open forcefully jolted me

awake.

Every time the dragon abruptly changed directions, severe pain shot up from my left shoulder where the chain linked my body to the beast's, as my flesh and joints were stretched into a bloody mess.

“GROOOOOAR!” it bellowed again as it suddenly dropped.

The sounds of something popping and snapping assaulted my ears.

Ah...

Just like that, the pain on my shoulder was gone, and everything went black.

Chapter 34: Indomitability

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! It hurts! Everything hurts!

In short, I'd lived.

One second I'd been stuck to the dragon as it whipped wildly around the skies, and the next I'd fallen onto a house somewhere, dramatically crashing through the ceiling.

My apologies to the (seemingly absent) homeowner.

Hngh... I'm...still...

I tried to make sense of my fragmented memories.

The dragon had begun to nosedive, and somehow, I'd managed to break away from it.

Then, as I'd plunged downward, I'd fired Arash at the ground, and the beam that had shot out of it had broken my fall. The impact had still been pretty powerful, mind you, so it was a good thing I'd still been in my Dáinsleif-enhanced state. Otherwise, I'd probably have eaten shit right then and there, thanks to all the flailing around the dragon was doing.

Okay, uh, guess I'll get up!

I couldn't just lay there and wheeze forever! I'd been lucky enough just to detach from the dragon, after all!

I should take the chance to heal, and... Huh?

As I stood, my body leaned heavily to the right for some reason. Not like a "dizzy" sort of heavy lean, but a "my center of gravity feels off" sort of heavy lean.

And despite my entire body being in severe pain, my left arm wasn't hurting at all.

Wait... No way...

That was when I first looked down at myself.

And then I noticed it.

M-My left arm. Where's my left arm?!

At that moment, I felt a searing pain where it'd been severed, near my left shoulder. The pain in my split nerves fried my brain like an electrical current, much worse than the rest of my battered and bruised body.

“Aaaaaaugh!” I screamed in agony.

Shit! Fuck! Argh!

The severed area burned hot, as if being scorched. I clenched my teeth so hard my molars cracked. Passing out would've let me escape the pain, but the intense agony I felt from my missing limb wouldn't even allow me that mercy.

“VESSEL!”

Muramasa's voice echoed faintly in my heart, seeming distant, somehow.

Right. I remember...

Just before my left arm had been severed, I'd stabbed the blade into the black dragon, shifting the Death Shot from my left hand to my right. That was why I'd been able to use it to break my fall.

Which had been a good call...and not *my* call. There was no way I'd have been able to make such a split-second decision.

The pain muddled my memories, but it had to have been Muramasa. Thanks, dude.

Shit, I'm gonna die. I'm seriously gonna die at this rate!

I silently prayed that someone, anyone, would come to my rescue.

Fortunately for me, I seemed to be in some sort of village. I mean, yes, kinda presumptuous of me to expect help after dropping from the sky out of nowhere, but come on! Anyone?!

A commotion outside seemed to answer my prayers as I heard people's voices.

I'm saved!

I figured they must all have been shocked, talking about the mysterious man who'd dropped from the sky. I'd have to be sure to apologize to them all later (especially the owner of the house I'd just wrecked). For now, though, I just wanted to yell at them to please come help me. Fast.

I didn't get the chance.

"The sky! A dragon's coming from the skyyyyyyyy!" someone shouted out.

And then a powerful gust of wind began to blow. People screamed, the walls around me were blown away, and my body was sent rolling.

I was already in so much pain that the tumble didn't even register as painful. Instead, my focus was fully on the now-exposed scenery outside the house.

"GROOOOOAR!"

The black dragon, spreading its wings, was glaring right at me, with no intention of letting me go. It had chased me all the way here, hell-bent on finishing me off.

Dude, go pick on someone your own size.

I was on the brink of death already. How was I supposed to fight that thing?

It's hopeless, I thought, my heart filling with despair.

"So it's over," Vortigern—leader of an organization of dark magi—mused to himself in his throne room.

What he saw was not his palace but the image of one man, whose body was torn to rags, his left arm gone—Crow, the black-haired youth.

Borrowing the dragon's senses, he watched the young man's pathetic, dying form.

"Hah! Releasing the dragon was worth it. Not even that brat can withstand the wrath of the Blight of the Heavens," he muttered, stifling a chuckle, stroking his haphazardly grown goatee. "Too bad, boy."

The tables could no longer be turned. Crow Titus's spirit had to have been irreversibly fractured.

Vortigern watched the hopeless struggle, playing out to the sounds of the people's screams, with glee.

"This takes care of *one* obstacle to our plans," he mused thoughtfully. "Next we must neutralize Iris of the White Blade... Hm?"

Crow Titus slowly pushed himself to his feet.

Disoriented, but steady. Frail, but heroic. This man, whose body and soul *should* have been broken beyond repair, was climbing back from the brink.

"What? How?"

One step. Another. Before Vortigern's bewildered eyes, the young man walked forward.

Panicked, the crowd fled away from the black dragon. And as if to protect them, Crow advanced *toward* it.

And not only that—

"I will not allow you to hurt these people," he declared defiantly. "Is it me you want? *Come and get me.*"

"What?!"

A grand, reverberating oath of protection. Crow stood strong and imposing, a beacon of hope even in his blood-soaked state.

"Ah... Ugh!"

As he looked upon this sight, a piercing shock coursed through Vortigern's chest.

Chapter 35: Murderous Roar

The community was in shambles.

A terrible shock wave, from the dragon's mere descent, had caused countless homes to collapse, and the air was thick with debris and dust.

And it was then, battered and broken, with an arm missing, trapped in the pits of despair, that I suddenly felt...*angry*.

"VESSEL! ESCAPE!"

"Shut up."

"WHAT?!"

"I don't want to hear your nonsense!"

There was no way I could escape anymore. More than that, however, I...no longer *wanted* to.

"GROOOOOOAR!"

Fuck off.

The dragon's roar grated on my ears.

Moments ago, I'd been scared to death. I was dead either way, however. The utter despair had crushed all of my fears.

And my heart was *boiling* with rage.

Why do I have to go through all this shit?

I'd lost an arm. My body was torn. The pit of my stomach was swirling.

Muramasa's recklessness had earned me the ire of the royal family, and now I'd been ordered to fight a dragon and die.

Why did this have to happen? Why did it have to happen to me?

Who was to blame? Was Muramasa the main cause? No, no it wasn't.

I'd found it by accident. And it wasn't malicious. Just hungry.

So, was it the murderous dragon's fault? Again, no.

It was enraged because I'd invaded its territory and grievously injured it. Of course it hated me. But that wasn't personal, not at all.

So...

The greatest evils here are the prime minister and the royal family. Yeah. I get it.

I was going to *kill* them. If it was the last thing I ever did, you bet your ass I was going to make them *pay*.

And I would slaughter *anything* that stood in my way too.

Unlike Muramasa, unlike this black dragon, there was clear malice in these people's orders. How dare they, how dare they try to hurt me?!

Fueled by unbridled anger, I pushed myself to my feet.

My missing left arm made me unsteady, but the black dragon did not take the opportunity to strike.

"G-GRAAAR!"

Instead, it was *incredibly* cautious, its eyes shining with more vigilance than when I had been whole.

That's right, dragon. I can kill you. I will not hesitate to.

I emerged from the dust, willingly drawing closer to the black beast.

Walking in the opposite direction of the crowd fleeing around me, I approached with murder in my eyes.

You did this to me. You'll pay too. I'll slaughter the royal family and every last one of their lackeys, even if it means you need to die first. Even if it's just for now, I'll survive. I'll kill you. I'll kill them all.

Perhaps those were the muddled thoughts of a dying mind, but I had never been so full of fury.

And so, for once, I wasn't acting out of self-preservation. I wanted to be a thorn in their side. I was *actually* going to fight as the radiant

Condemner of All Evil, *just* to spite the royal family.

I stood valiantly in front of the dragon, raising my voice so that people would hear.

“I will not allow you to hurt these people. Is it me you want? Come and get me,” I declared. On a scale of one to ten, I looked sharp as all shit. *“Muramasa. Lend me your strength!”*

“AS YOU WISH!”

With a force matching my rage, I raced forward, the ground cracking beneath my feet as I closed the distance between myself and the beast in an instant.

The dragon roared in confusion.

I should’ve been dead. I should’ve been unable to move with such speed.

How did I do it, you ask?

I’m cursed. Even if I’m apart from the sword, we’re still connected. As long as I’m alive, Muramasa can control me!



Guided by the cursed blade, I drew Arash, the Death Shot, with my right hand.

“Perish!”

I thrust the large-caliber weapon at the dragon and fired at point-

blank.

A split second before the destructive beam was released, the black beast quickly soared. It was the first time it'd performed an evasive maneuver.

The shot missed it, and pierced through the forest beyond the village, scorching hundreds of trees in its path. The gun's power was truly terrifying.

So, dragon. You only got serious about killing me when I tried to shoot this thing, right? In other words, you know that if I pull off a close-range shot, you'll end up just like those trees over there.

This time, Arash—who usually brought death to its wielder in exchange for its incredible firepower—showed no signs of wanting to try.

I mean, why would it? *“You’re satisfied, aren’t you, Arash? I’m already a dead man walking, aren’t I?”*

“O, MY MASTER! YOUR LIMBS TORN, YOUR ORGANS RUPTURED, YOUR BLOOD GUSHING, YOUR BONES SHATTERED! THE BEAUTY OF IT ALL! SCATTER! SCATTER!” the gun screamed in ecstasy, sounding very excited at the prospect of me fighting to the death in the throes of such agony.

“Fine, you bastard. Get the hots for my corpse all you want. In exchange, you’ll do exactly as I tell you!”

An angry roar reverberated across the skies.

From the wings of the black dragon flying overhead, two magic circles appeared.

They looked like a pair of giant eyes. Aimed down at me, they began to concentrate high amounts of aether.

“Oh. Is that a wind spell coming from your wings? Predictable.”

The next moment, steel rained down upon the dragon's wings from above, piercing their thin membranes forty-seven times!

Astonished and in intense pain, the black dragon roared.

Thanks to its wounds, the magic circles on its wings dispersed, and the storm they had been about to unleash raged wildly. How amusing

to see its massive body toyed with by its own wind!

“I’d heard dragons can use spells. All it took was a little thinking to figure out what your trick was. There’s no way a giant lump of useless flesh like you can fly that quickly!”

In other words, the dragon had been using a spell to generate wind, enhancing the power of its flapping wings, and thus had been able to accelerate rapidly despite its massive size.

After I figured that out, dealing with it was easy. I just needed to destroy the source of its little trick!

The forty-seven Dáinsleifs scattered into the air around me.

They were the ones that had shredded the dragon’s wings. And now the swarm of vampiric blades was swimming through the air.

“Good job, Dáinsleif! It was you who stopped the bleeding in my left shoulder, right?”

“TEE HEE!”

Aw, it was nervous! How cute! For a bloodsucking blade, anyway. I was in its debt!

See, when my arm had been torn off, I’d hardly bled, for some reason. Thinking about that, I remembered something.

Dáinsleif’s original owner had formed blood into huge flying blades. So this thing can not only convert the blood that it absorbs into power for its wielder, it can also manipulate blood to an extent.

If it could turn blood into a flying blade, it stands to reason it could make itself fly by being covered in blood.

Under this assumption, when I’d stepped out from the dust, I’d released all the daggers from my pockets.

And so, while the dragon’s focus was on me, I had the swarm of blades take to the skies, then rain down on the beast for a surprise attack at just the right time.

“GROOOOOOOAR!”

The black creature exploded in anger, trying in vain to flap its wings and avoid falling.

“Aethon! Activate!”

“HA HA!”

The black chain coiled around the dragon’s neck began to wriggle, and in an instant it stretched, tangling with the beast’s wings!

“GROOOAR?!”

Thanks, buddy.

Completely halting its movements was impossible, but hindering it from flapping its wings even slightly was enough.

Because, you see, thanks to that...

“Now you’re just dropping like the sack of meat you are.”

And thus, the next second, with a thundering crash, the black dragon hit the ground, sending its flesh and blood gushing forth in a gory shower.

Its roar of agony echoed throughout the village.

Weighing tens of tons and taking a fall like that, it had to have suffered massive damage to even its internal organs.

Look! Now we match!

“G-GRAAR!”

The dragon writhed in pain, but still had a will to fight. In a final act of defiance, it raised its massive claws overhead, aiming at me.

Ah, yes.

“I almost forgot to return the favor.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I fired the aethereal gun, its destructive beam tearing off the dragon’s arm, causing a massive splatter of fresh blood.

It let out a pitiful, anguished scream.

The moment its giant body began to convulse, Muramasa—still stuck to the dragon’s back until now—came loose.

And, as if meant to be, it fell right in front of me, piercing the ground.

“Welcome back, demonic blade,” I said.

Sword in hand, I approached the black dragon.

It seemed unable to move, overcome by pain. With each step I took toward it, its once ferocious visage twisted more and more. It was shuddering in fear.

Another pitiful roar escaped it.

The jet-black blade was reflected clearly in its eyes.

Muramasa, the Black Reaper. The giant asshole of a sword that had changed my life forever.

Yeah, it was an awful, sickening piece of trash excuse for a partner, *but* there was one thing about it I couldn’t deny I liked.

“You know, at least you look really cool.”

And then, in one swift motion, I plunged Muramasa straight into the dragon’s eye, past the hilt, all the way to my elbow. And then I twisted it.

A miserable cry of agony rang in my ears.

Behind the dragon’s eye, its brain collapsed with a gruesome squelch.

Another shriek. And then another. In its final moments, the dragon roared and writhed.

“GRA... AH...”

And finally, it was gone.

“Hmph.”

Pulling out the blade, I thrust it upward at the heavens.

The astonished villagers stood around me—a good distance away—and stared in disbelief.

I’d felt it. They’d been blindly fleeing in terror, but their feet had

stopped them dead in their tracks. After all, the dragon hadn't been chasing after them.

And then they'd looked back and seen it overpowered by a lone magus knight.

Showtime.

I—the thorn in the royal family's side, the nobody—was going to become a nationwide legend, engraved in the people's hearts.

Gotta look cool, at least.

Time to be the most dignified Condemner this world had ever seen.

“Embrace your doom, vile fiend! The empire's peace shall not be disturbed as long as I, Crow Titus, draw breath!”

“M-MR. VESSEL, SIR?!”

The cursed arms were in quite a state.

Chapter 36: The Next Evil

“What?! Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens, defeated?! Crow Titus... I knew he was an excellent warrior, but *this*?!”

Vortigern, leader of the dark magus organization Wanpurgis, was at a loss for words. He trembled on his throne, his mind racing with thoughts of Crow—that inhuman, monstrous man.

A legendary dragon! One of the Seven Calamities! Countless magus knights had given their lives to merely *seal* it! The beast had been a key element of his plan!

How could that man have defeated it?!

“He...was overwhelmed, at first,” he mused to himself, astonished. “All he could do was run from Nidhogg. Even after he managed to fight back with his little tricks, it wasn’t long before he was beaten half to death, and yet...”

Crow’s body had been reduced to mincemeat. He’d lost one of his arms and dropped from the skies right smack into the middle of a settlement. To Vortigern, victory had seemed all but assured. The dragon wouldn’t even have needed to deliver the final blow, so close was the swordsman to his end.

“But then, on the brink of death, his strength surged...”

And the curtains had risen on the macabre dance of death that followed. The legendary evil dragon toyed with. Its every action stopped in its tracks. Crow had reaped its life in a crushing victory.

Indeed, the young man had, in that moment, been the very picture of the Grim Reaper. Through the black dragon’s eyes, Vortigern had felt the unfathomable menace of the raven-haired swordsman in his very bones. The dark magus’s arms—so strong, so muscular—had trembled in fear.

“Ha ha! Oh, Crow, how I despise you! Twenty long years building up to this, to the torment of the empire’s pathetic lot, and it’s all gone awry because of *you*. But... Hah! I see...” Vortigern gave a small chuckle.

It wasn’t the chuckle of the leader of a terrorist organization, but

that of a man who had once been destined to be the emperor of Lemuria.

“Making a display of your power to protect the people. How gallant, Crow!” he exclaimed in sincere praise, breaking into a wide grin.

His plans had been thrown into disarray, all because Crow Titus had happened to drop onto a small town. That was fate’s turning point, Vortigern knew.

“As soon as the dragon swooped down, and the people’s cries rang out, that boy transformed into something truly terrifying!”

Crow had risen in response to the screams of the people. He’d made a solemn vow, a knight’s pledge to protect them, no matter what. The fury in his eyes had been nothing more than a manifestation of the justice burning bright in his heart.

“A man who can rise from the brink of death and turn into a demon to protect others...”

Crow, the Condemner of All Evil.

Leader of dark magi though he was, Vortigern felt respect for the young man. He wouldn’t have minded being condemned by Crow’s hands.

Except, of course, in reality, Crow was no protector, not at all.

All that had happened was that his anger had reached a boiling point and he’d snapped. But to Vortigern, he looked like nothing less than the greatest of all knights. The absurd delusion that this era had produced a hero to stand against him, the *king* of all evil, was intoxicating to him.

“Ha ha ha! Very well, then, Crow. I look forward to meeting you face-to-face. It’s about time I took the stage myself,” Vortigern said, stroking his goatee. “But before I do...”

He paused, filled with anticipation of what was to come.

“You’ll need to survive, boy. That coward of an emperor is far, *far* more terrifying than I am, in a way.”

“Crow!”

Tiana ran through the woods at a far greater speed than that of an ordinary person, propelled by her aethereal weapon.

“Please! Be safe, I beg of you!”

She knew Crow had defeated the dragon. He’d left her with the mission order the prime minister had entrusted to him, and since the completion mark had emerged on the paper, she knew the outcome of the battle.

“Crow! Oh, Crow!” she exclaimed, in tears, as she ran toward where he’d fallen.

The last time she’d seen him, the dragon had been viciously flailing around, battering his body. His left arm had been torn off, and he’d dropped to the ground.

How things had gone from there, she didn’t know. All she knew was that, even if he had won, Crow *had* to be on the brink of death.

Panting, crying, she continued to run, calling out his name.

Finally, in the distance beyond the woods, a devastated settlement came into view. In the middle lay the dragon’s limp body. Beside it, the villagers admiringly surrounded her first love, the young man who had overcome a terrible ordeal.

And in the next instant, the swordsman was surrounded by masked individuals carrying numerous aethereal arms.

“Crow Titus! Apologies, but we have to destroy you.”

At the sight of the strangers, the villagers fled, screaming in terror.

“Wait, that’s the assassin group under direct command of the royal family—the Masquerade!”

The royal family’s trump card.

They were the darkness that nested within the hidden depths of the empire. Grim reapers with permission to kill, only ever deployed against those who had truly incurred the wrath of the royal family.

So that’s *what this is!* Crow was no ordinary rookie, of course, but even then, the mission had been overkill. If it became public

knowledge, why, everyone would think they were trying to make the young man disappear. *Crow would instantly become a national hero for defeating the dragon, noble or not. The royal family would come under fire for forcing a rookie to hunt down a dragon!*

Which could only mean...

“They wanted to make sure Crow was dealt with, even if he managed to defeat the dragon! What the hell?!” Tiana exclaimed in anger as she continued to press on.

She couldn’t allow it. She *wouldn’t* allow it. Why should someone who had given his all to overcome the impossible be subjected to such a terrible fate?!

She shoved the thought of her own weakness to the back of her mind. That meaningless facet of reality was no longer a concern.

With no regard for her life, Tiana simply lunged with all her might at one of the members of the Masquerade near Crow.

“What?! Who the hell are *you*?!” the masked figure yelled.

“Lend me your strength, Gleipr, Bolt of Nirvana!” Tiana shouted, clenching her pink gauntlet and sending her fist flying at the enemy.

Her fist sank into the stranger’s head, and their skull burst, sending the pieces flying.

She heaved. Her fist dripped with a large amount of fresh blood—her enemy’s, yes, but her own as well, gushing forth from her shattered hand.

Gleipr, her ethereal arm, allowed her to manipulate the electrical current within her own body. In other words, she could control the signals flowing from her brain to her nerves, which enabled her to unleash several times her normal physical strength.

“Shit! Ugh!” She’d taken down one enemy, but in so doing, she’d rendered one of her hands unusable.

That was the result of carelessly using her weapon’s power. Manipulating one’s brain signals was no simple task, and a miscalculation in the amount of power exerted could easily lead to one’s body falling apart.

She didn't care.

"Crow," she said, turning quietly to face the man who had set her heart alight for the first time.

He really did look like he'd reached his limit. Just the wind from her punching the masked figure to death seemed to have caused him to collapse.

Beside him, his black sword vibrated, as if concerned for his safety.

"Ha ha! Even your cursed sword cares for you, huh, dear?" she remarked, amused.

Such a remarkable man. On top of his many achievements, he'd summarily defeated *the* Nidhogg. At this point, he was already a legend. For humanity, ever suffering from the threat of aetherborn, he was a beacon of hope.

Tiana steeled her resolve.

"Please rest, Crow. I'll protect you with my life!"

She turned back around, and a dozen or so Masquerade members were raising their weapons at once, shouting from beneath their masks the names of their aethereal arms, which caused destructive aether to overflow from the weapons.

"Disruption encountered in the assassination mission. We will now eliminate the abnormality!" they declared, and all fell upon her at once.

Tiana was fearless, however, and charged straight into them. "Don't you *dare* touch my man!"

Chapter 37: Enter the White Blade

Tiana, though just a low-ranking knight, faced off alone against the ten or so Masquerade members.

“Haaaaaaah!”

Her fist flew as she spat out blood. Her feet kicked as her flesh tore. Tiana burned her own life as fuel for her fight.

By pushing Gleipr’s power to its limit, she sent her nerves into overdrive, pushing her physical abilities to dozens of times their normal levels.

“Diiiiiiiie!” she roared as she raged through the enemy, her limbs honed into lethal weapons. Her every attack was mortal, and though the masked figures were superior to her in terms of fighting ability, she could go toe-to-toe against them.

And thus she did, until she reached her limit.

“Ugh!” she groaned as a severe shock rattled her heart. Her pulse rose painfully, then suddenly plummeted.

As she clutched her pained chest, it dawned on her that every part of her hands, all the way down to her wrists, had been crushed to a pulp. Suddenly, she couldn’t stand, her knees barely held together by torn skin and nerves.

“Damn...it!”

Such was the price for exerting far more than her usual strength for a prolonged period of time. What was more, she’d taken the full brunt of multiple enemy attacks, and her body was covered in bleeding wounds. Her nerves were in such a severe state, however, that she wasn’t even aware of her condition.

“Obstruction neutralized. Proceeding with target elimination.”

As soon as her body stopped moving, the group of assassins turned its attention to the fallen Crow.

“D-Don’t touch my Crow!” she yelled as one of them approached his unconscious form.

Tiana forced herself to her feet and charged the figure, tackling them to the ground. Swinging her partially torn leg, she kicked the other assassins away from the young man.

“Crow’s a hero!” she roared, spitting out blood. “He defeated a dragon! He’s a beacon of hope for our country! Don’t you dare touch him!”

The masked figures faltered for a moment at her frantic cries. Was it fear of someone who was prepared to lay down her life? Or was it something else?

Whatever the reason, their hesitation lasted but a moment.

“Brave girl. Young hero. We will eliminate you both,” they declared.

It was the end of Tiana’s struggle. The masked figures fell upon them both all at once, and she no longer had the strength to intercept their attack.

“I...” Her senses were numb. Even without taking another blow, Tiana was already finished. Still, she refused to give up. “I...won’t...”

No matter whether her body decayed, whether her life reached its end, she would still push on.

“I won’t let you! I’ll protect Crow!”

Against all odds, she pushed herself to her feet, ready to confront the assassins, forcing her dying body to react through the power of her aethereal arm.

“In that case, we will end your suffering swiftly!” they said.

This was it. The bearers of death raised their lethal arms as one.

“You’ve done well,” a voice rang out. “Thank you for protecting him. I’ll handle the rest!”

A brilliant white flash of a blade cut down every foe in an instant.

“Huh?!” Tiana exclaimed, her eyes wide open.

Her consciousness was waning from blood loss, but she could still recognize the female swordsman standing before her, smiling with a pure white sword in her hand.

The most powerful of all female knights, current wielder of the holy sword.

“L-Lady Iris Zehirete!” Tiana exclaimed.

The elite magus knight of the Imperial Order, Iris of the White Blade, had descended upon them—a trump card to overturn their hopeless situation.

The sliver of time that the low-ranking knight Tiana had bought that day would alter the course of the empire’s fate.

Chapter 38: The Emperor of Anguish

“Lady Iris!” Tiana called out.

Iris gently caught the young knight in her arms. The soft touch brought tears to the peach-haired knight’s eyes. This wasn’t a dream. Iris of the White Blade truly *had* come to her rescue!

“Why are you here?”

“I heard about Crow’s plight from a certain individual,” Iris explained as she took out a blue potion Tiana had never seen before. “Don’t worry. Even among royalty, there are still decent people.”

Three days later, in the Lemurian Empire’s throne room, a half-crazed scream echoed.

“What is this I hear about *Nidhogg*, *Blight of the Heavens*, being the dragon that breached the inner zone?!”

An older man—Zilsonia von Lemuria, the emperor—pulled his hair in distress.

“What manner of jest is this, Prime Minister?!” the emperor demanded angrily. “Did you lie in your report?! Explain yourself!”

The prime minister bowed his head deeply before speaking. “I-I would never jest about so serious a matter, Your Majesty! My men told me it was just an ordinary dragon, I swear!”

What had enraged the emperor was that the dragon meant to eliminate Crow had turned out to be one of the feared Seven Calamities, who were supposed to be safely sealed away.

This fact hadn’t been discovered until *after* the incident, when the residents of the settlement the dragon had descended upon had come to plead for its restoration and to report the incident.

“We were attacked by a dragon hundreds of meters long, but Sir Crow defeated it,” they’d said.

No dragon but Nidhogg fit that description.

Thus, the emperor had gone to the place where the beast had been sealed. There, he had eventually confirmed that the seal once placed on the fearsome dragon had indeed been broken by unnatural means.

“Such a massive monster is not something to be used in a *scheme*! It’s a threat that must be brought down at any cost, even if it takes all of our nation’s power!”

Zilsonia trembled at the thought of what could have happened if anything had gone awry. This was not out of concern for the people, however.

“Prime Minister! What if *I* had been attacked?!”

The emperor didn’t give a rat’s ass about his people. No, all he cared about was his own life. His body, his noble blood, had to be protected at all costs, even if that meant using every last knight to achieve it.

One *could* have said this was only natural for royalty. However, Zilsonia’s words were the ravings of a mind gone mad.

“If I am lost, the *nation* is lost! Harm done to me is harm done to the *nation*! Do you understand this?!”

In an act utterly unbefitting for an emperor, he raised his royal scepter and struck Superbius with it.

“Y-Your Majesty?!” the prime minister exclaimed with a pained groan. “What is—?”

“Silence! Shut up! Those who would threaten me deserve death! Die! Die!” the emperor ranted, striking him over and over.

The dull sounds of the blows and the prime minister’s cries echoed together across the throne room.

“I-I have done no wrong!” Superbius pleaded. “It was all my subordinate! He lied in the report!”

“And with that subordinate gone missing, you, as his superior, must take responsibility! You’ve endangered your emperor’s life! The punishment is death!”

“My emperor, please!”

The ruler raised his scepter high. And just as its tip was about to strike the prime minister's head—

“Stop this, Zil!” a girl's voice echoed, freezing him in his tracks.

“Oh... You...!” the emperor stammered, panting heavily.

A girl walked in through the doors to the throne room and approached the enraged ruler. She didn't even seem to be a teenager yet, despite her dignified behavior. She had flowing white hair and wore an elegant snow-white dress.

“Superbius is not the only one who bears responsibility for this incident. You do too, do you not, Zil?”

“What?! Why?!”

“The emperor alone should know where the Seven Calamities are sealed. This matter is one requiring the utmost confidentiality. And so, if one with an inclination for evil was able to determine where such a foe was located, does that not imply a fault in your ability to perform your duty?”

The emperor listened quietly to her ruthless accusation. Had it come from someone below him, like the prime minister, he could've immediately lashed out, demanding to know how dare they insult him.

However, his bravado failed him before this young girl, in front of whom he cowered like a child.



“P-Please don’t be mean to me, mother!”

Indeed, the girl before them was none other than Zilsonia’s biological mother, the queen dowager Eldia von Lemuria!

“No one is being ‘mean’ to you, pitiful child. Do you realize the

damage that would've been done if this knight, this Crow, hadn't defeated the black dragon?" she asked sharply. "And you and the prime minister were both *hoping* he would fail, no?!"

"That's not..." The emperor trailed off, his face growing pale as he realized it would be futile to continue denying it.

Although his mother looked to be seven years old, she was actually seventy. Thanks to her long years spent among high society, where schemes and intrigues ran amok, she had easily seen through the plan to eliminate this commoner named Crow Titus.

"Do you not know how the modern nobility and royalty came into existence?" Eldia asked her now silent son, her eyes hardening as she fixed her gaze upon him. "Those who hunted down the many aetherborn plaguing the land earned the respect and trust of the people."

The atmosphere in the room turned ice-cold, and Zilsonia could feel her fury.

"Indeed, if kind, strong commoners like Iris gain influence, the value of lineage will decline. Between those who ride on the coattails of their *ancestors* and those who help people *today*, it's obvious who the common folk will hold in higher regard, wouldn't you say?"

"I..."

"Silence! Trying to eliminate a promising young man in an attempt to maintain your own authority is nothing but protecting your aging ego. You would do well to be ashamed!"

Before his angry mother, Zilsonia continued to tremble. Enduring her admonishment was all he could do. Partly because she was his mother, yes, but that wasn't the only reason.

"Emperor Zilsonia, Prime Minister Superbius, count yourselves fortunate that I've entrusted the holy sword Excalibur to Iris. Were it still in my hand, there would be two heads at my feet this day."

Her chilling words left the men speechless.

Eldia came from a noble military family. Among her peers, she was considered the most powerful, and her combat potential was immeasurable. Her youthful appearance was merely a side effect of her overwhelming compatibility with the holy sword.

“Now, then. I have said what I wished to say. This retired old woman will now take her leave,” she declared. With that, she turned on her heel and confidently strode out of the room, looking every inch the queen she had once been.

No sooner had her figure vanished beyond the doors than the emperor cursed under his breath.

“Why is this happening to me?! All I wanted was for that pest of a commoner to disappear!”

He’d done the same before to many others, after all.

“Just like my pathetic brother! That little *bastard* Vortigern!”

Chapter 39: Crow Redivivus

I wasn't sure how much time had passed since my fight with the dragon.

When I came to, I was in the dark. I couldn't see anything, not even an inch in front of me, nor feel the ground beneath my feet. It felt like I was just a soul, floating in some space. Obviously a pretty weird place to find myself in.

And it definitely wasn't a hospital.

"Wait, am I in the afterlife? Did I die?"

Such an outcome was plausible. Even ignoring the loss of my arm, I had severe wounds all over.

And the very last thing I remembered was being attacked by a bunch of guys in masks.

Tiana had come running to my rescue, and then I'd lost consciousness. I wondered what had happened to her.

"I hope she's okay. I hope she gets to live and enjoy her youth and not die a virgin like me..."

Sigh. Now I was getting depressed. I hadn't thought I'd die this young. There went my dream of a cute bride and a peaceful life, dammit.

"Well, now that I'm dead, it's too late to lament things. I'll just go to sleep and hope the next life's better."

With that, I closed my eyes. I mean, I was already in the dark, so that didn't matter, but you know. It was the spirit of the thing.

"Mm... When I wake up, I'll be in heaven, I'm sure! And then after my soul gets a little rest, it'll be time for me to move on to my next life. I'm gonna be reborn as a tough-as-nails, dashing, handsome dude. And not some wimpy, gloomy jackass. Yeah."

"MUNCH..."

"The reborn Crow will be so charismatic that *everyone* in his village

will love him. He won't have just that lying sack of shit Fukushima to talk to. And then, a terrorist group will attack the village, but Crow Number Two, who will have happened upon a sword, will defeat them. Thus will begin his epic tale...! I mean, I don't like combat in *this* life, but the *next* Crow will be like, so good at combat, dude, like, holy-shit-I-don't-even-know-how-good level good. He'll be invincible. And then all the big tiddy knights are gonna love him, and they're gonna be *all* over him."

"MUNCH MUNCH..."

"And then stuff's gonna happen, and he'll do all sorts of great things, and a pretty princess is gonna fall for him, and— Oh! Oh! It'll turn out his dad's the knight commander, and he's gonna have so many connections, he's gonna get some job that's gonna be, like, *super* important for the country!"

"MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH! MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH!!!"

"Holy shit! Shut the fuck up! Quit it with the damn munching!!!"

Come on! I was busy planning out my next life! What was making that infuriating noise?!

I got so mad my eyes snapped open. And—

"TASTY! TASTY!"

"Uh. Whoa."

When had *this* thing gotten here?

Here I was, thinking I was rid of Muramasa, but there the stupid sword was, slurping up a semitransparent ginormous dragon's soul. Like, *shhhhhhhhhhlrp*.

"TASTE! QUANTITY! FIVE STARS! WOULD EAT DRAGON AGAIN!"

Its hilt was swelling up like it had cheek pouches or something as it continued to just merrily munch away.

So *that's* what was making that insufferable racket.

"Okay, a hundred points for killing the thing, but zero points for table manners. You're the epitome of awful. Die in a fire, dude," I protested. "Speaking of dying... Muramasa, why are you in the afterlife?"

This thing was gonna stalk me in death too? Really?

I mean, I guess it could *try*, but see, I was destined for *heaven*. And Muramasa was a piece of shit, so it was going to hell. Right? So it shouldn't even have tried.

Instead of listening to my advice, Muramasa just swung its blade sideways. Okay, then.

"THIS IS NOT THE AFTERLIFE. IT'S YOUR INNER WORLD, VESSEL."

"Wait, really?!"

So I *wasn't* dead?!

"AND YOU TOO ARE A PIECE OF SHIT, DESTINED FOR HELL."

"What did you say to me, asshole?!"

Me? *Me, a piece of shit?! Also, when did it get so eloquent?!*

"YOU'VE LED MANY WOMEN ON, PIECE OF SHIT VESSEL."

"Are you serious? Women won't even look at me, dude!"

"..."

"What?! You wanna say something, say it, damn you!"

Stupid thing, acting like a dumb sword would have something important to say!

"MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH!"

And stop chewing with your mouth open! Swallow before you talk, idiot!

"MUNCH MUNCH...GULP! THE NECESSARY AMOUNT HAS BEEN CONSUMED. THE REMAINDER WILL SERVE AS EMERGENCY RATIONS. I SHALL PACK THE LEFTOVERS," Muramasa said, all finished eating the soul for now.

"You can't just leave a half-eaten dragon carcass in my mind! What if it starts to rot?!"

"DON'T CARE. ANYWAY. EVOLUTION TIME."

“Evolution?!”

Oh yeah! It *had* said something to that effect! Like, if it ate that dragon, it could do that.

Hmm. I hated to rain on its parade, but uh... I *kinda* didn't want that to happen.

“I don't really get it, but you'll get stronger, right? Which means you'll get better at controlling me, which means I probably won't be able to regain full control anymore, which means no thank you! I wanna go back to taking it easy!”

“IF I DO NOT EVOLVE, YOU WILL DIE, VESSEL.”

“Bwuh?!”

What did it *mean*, I was gonna die?! I was fine...right?!

“YOUR ORGANS ARE COMPLETELY CRUSHED. MULTIPLE ORGAN FAILURE WILL RESULT IN CERTAIN DEATH.”

Oh. Oh yeah! When that black dragon had started flailing around, the acceleration had pressed my body, like, *splat*. And then I'd nosedived to the floor, which meant five or six of my organs being crushed made sense.

“I guess those potions and things that knights use can't really restore organ function. But you're telling me that if you evolve, that's gonna save me?”

“CORRECT,” it said, nodding.

You know, this demon sword *was* a piece of trash who liked to turn my body into a wet rag for the sake of filling its stomach, *but* it wouldn't lie to me like that. It's not like there was any point in trying to cheer me up, so it had to be serious.

“A'ight! Evolve away, then!”

What else was I gonna do? Say no?

I didn't *want* to die. Nor did I want this guy's hold on me to get even stronger—what with how it liked to use me as its plaything and all—but desperate times called for desperate measures.

So I nodded. And Muramasa was positively *beaming*.

It must've been *really* looking forward to using me as a puppet for its gourmand pursuits!

"I SHALL BECOME ONE WITH YOUR SOUL, VESSEL. TO THAT END, YOU MUST STEEL YOUR RESOLVE."

"Steel my resolve? What resolve? I'm the lamest guy around! Heh!"

"DO NOT BRAG ABOUT THAT. STEEL YOUR RESOLVE. NAME A DESIRE. A HOPE. A WISH. SHOUT THEM OUT FROM YOUR HEART, WITH GUSTO."

Oh! Desires and hopes and wishes? I had *tons* of those! Just had to shout them out, right? Okay!

"VESSEL. WHAT IS YOUR DESIRE?" Muramasa asked as dark aether sprung forth from its blade.

My inner world was painted black (note to self: clean it later, it's dirty) as I answered its question.

"My desire...? Well, honestly, all I want is to be hella popular with the ladies and take it easy!"

"UH. WOW."

Muramasa seemed weirded out, but that *was* my wish, you know?

"I've been the Condemner of All Evil for the sake of others all this time! Shouldering every burden, every responsibility! I'm sick of it! I wanna move on already and live in peace!!!"

I was tired of suffering. Present Crow had done a lifetime's worth of good already in just the past few weeks. I wanted to live the rest of my life on my terms!

"VESSEL. WHAT IS YOUR HOPE?"

"My hope...is to have a big tiddy wife who takes, like, super good care of me, and also gives me money! I'd do anything for that! Um, except fighting!"

"WOOOW."

Can it, Muramasa!

Yeah! I was gonna be *honest* about my wants for once! Up until

now, I'd just wanted to get a decently attractive wife, but after nearly eating shit to that dragon, I realized something! Something *important!*

If you only get one shot at life and death could come at any time, you should aim for the *stars!*

And the brightest star was a beautiful lady willing to support me financially!

“LASTLY, VESSEL, WHAT IS YOUR WISH?”

My wish? *Easy!*

“I hereby declare that I, Crow Titus, wish to someday sever all ties with you, you demonic embodiment of all that is evil and terrible! I wish for my freedom and peace back!”

Yes! *That* was it!

“That’s my wish!!!” I cried out (internally).

With a rumble, the darkness flowing from Muramasa enveloped my entire inner world. (Please don’t soil it! Thanks!)

And then, I could feel my body again. Strength coursed through me, and my senses were sharpened.

I knew I was about to wake up.

My consciousness rose from my filthy inner world—thanks, Muramasa (and half-eaten dragon carcass)—and tried to return to its rightful place.

Muramasa had one final question for me.

“YOU HATE ME THAT MUCH?”

Huh? What a weird thing to ask.

“Of course I do! You mess me up whenever you get the munchies! My life’s all weird because of you, you know!”

Seriously. This thing had screwed *everything* up.

I had been happy living as an ordinary village dude. Now I was a knight, forced to fight evil. A very tough life for a pacifist like me!

But, well...

“I did get to meet Iris because of you. And you kinda were pretty cool in the fight against the dragon back there.”

And, I mean...

“I do want to cut ties with you, but that doesn’t mean I want you, like, gone from the world or anything.”

“!!!”

The garbage sword vibrated at my answer.

I kind of made a face at it as I woke up, wondering what this weird-ass emotional reaction was.

And then—

“D-Die, Crow Titus!”

Whaaaaaaat???

Why was I surrounded by a bunch of prisoner-looking dudes?!

What the hell?!

Chapter 40: Evil Strikes

“It’s been a week since the black dragon incident. He still hasn’t stirred.”

In a room at a certain estate, the golden-haired knight Iris watched over a man’s sleeping form.

“Crow...”

Crow Titus had only just been knighted. And yet, the raven-haired youth had been the one to end the sudden threat of the dark dragon Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens. If he hadn’t done so, the beast might’ve laid waste to the entire nation.

“You’ve done well, Crow. Word of your deeds is spreading across all of Lemuria. You’re a hero to this country,” Iris said softly.

Despite her words of gentle praise, her face remained drained of color.

The price Crow had paid for victory was too great. His bones were broken, his flesh torn, his veins split, his organs ruptured. And with his left arm severed, he was past the point of no return.

That he was alive at all was a miracle.

Though he still drew shallow breaths, there was no guarantee the next one wouldn’t be his last.

“Oh, Crow! Crow!” Iris lamented, shedding tears for the hundredth time.

According to the doctor, the damage to his organs was too severe. He’d estimated that Crow had a week left to live, if that.

And that had been a week ago.

The doctor’s estimate had, cruelly enough, been accurate. Just moments ago, Crow’s breathing had begun to sound labored.

“Oh,” she murmured, clasping his hand. His pulse was faint. “Crow, please don’t die! Don’t leave me!”

Yet despite her reluctance to admit it, she knew the flame of his life was about to be extinguished.

Iris had felled countless aetherborn. Her familiarity with taking lives meant she could sense his impending demise.

“Crow, you saved me! I, who had always longed to be a knight, who *became* a knight, was on the verge of losing sight of it all, thanks to the whims of the corrupt nobility and royalty! My spirit was dying, and it was you who saved it!”

Her hand tightened around his.

Iris could never forget what he'd done for her that day. Like a hero from a tale, he had sprung forth and rescued her from her distress.

Affording no mercy to any evil that would disturb the peace, risking his life and fighting to the limit, Crow was Iris's beacon of hope.

Together, she believed, they could have carved a path to a wonderful future.

And if this was going to be the end, if he was going to leave this world...

“If you die, Crow, let me join you!”

Yes, she would go with him.

But there was someone there to keep her in check.

“Do not be foolish, Iris. What good would it do for you to die as well?” A young voice rang out, admonishing the knight for her impulsive decision.

Iris turned to look behind her. “Eldia, my mentor...”

Before her stood the empress dowager, looking as youthful as ever in her white dress. Once upon a time, she had wielded Iris's aethereal arm, Excalibur. Her present form was a result of her overwhelming compatibility with the holy sword, which prevented her from aging.

“The girl who fought for Crow's sake, Tiana, has been sent to House Alithlai's care. Her condition is quite stable. She should wake soon.”

There was one person other than Crow who was to be commended for her actions during the incident with the black dragon—and that was Tiana von Alithlai. After Crow had defeated the dragon, it was she who had kept the raven-haired swordsman's mysterious assailants at bay, despite being a low-ranking knight.

And so Iris was grateful to her from the bottom of her heart.

"I...I see. That's wonderful news indeed. I owe her a great deal." Iris was choked with tears as she spoke. "But Crow, he's—"

"Maintain your composure, Iris," the empress cut in, embracing the tearful blonde knight. Eldia felt more responsible for Crow's condition than anyone else. "What happened was my son's doing. Zilsonia sent Crow after the menacing dragon that arose in our nation, and had the secret order of assassins, the Masquerade, tail him as a backup plan." When Crow had squared off against the dragon, the emperor's mother had suspected just such a ploy. She'd told Iris, who'd then rushed to the site of the battle, barely making it in time to save Crow and Tiana from certain death.

Eldia was also the owner of the estate in which Crow slept now.

"Granted, the emperor didn't know that the dragon in question was Nidhogg. Crow has accomplished a truly remarkable feat." Originally, the Blight of the Heavens had been sealed away, in a location known only to the royal family. How could it have been released? This had to be a conspiracy, Eldia posited.

"My mentor, what should I do now?" Iris lamented.

"We can but pray for Crow's recovery. And no matter what happens, you should not think of following him in death. Am I clear?"

"Y-Yes!"

Together, they held Crow's hand and hoped for a miracle.

How could this have happened to such a promising youth? Turned into a bloody mess, deprived of one of his limbs, and then—to top it all off—set upon by assassins?

It was unbearably horrific.

"Crow...!"

“Young Crow...”

The two knights pleaded with the heavens.

It didn't matter if he could never fight again. *Please*, they begged. *Spare him his life.*

But it wasn't salvation that arrived for Crow.

“Is Crow Titus here?!” a voice suddenly rang out.

What came was, in fact, another trial.

“Who are you?!” Eldia demanded, turning at the sound.

There stood a group of raggedy men, clutching the estate's maids to their chests.

“What is this?!” the empress exclaimed.

“W-We're sorry, mistress! These people appeared suddenly— Eek!”

One of the men pressed a knife to the maid's throat. A thin line of blood trickled down her pale skin. “Shut up!” the man commanded before turning to Iris and the empress. “And you two, you know the drill, yeah? Try anything funny, and you can kiss these girls goodbye.”

The two female knights stood frozen in their tracks. Something didn't compute. How had these interlopers taken all the maids in the estate hostage without making a single sound?

And that wasn't all.

“They have aethereal arms of their own. And high-quality ones too,” Eldia murmured with certainty. With so many powerful weapons, there was no telling what might happen. “So high-quality, in fact, that vulgar thugs such as yourselves should not own them. Who gave them to you?”

“It's none of your business, you loli hag!” one of the men said. “We have only one demand. We want the life of that sleeping bastard over there, Crow Titus.”

As one, the men readied their arms—including weapons with immensely destructive powers.

“You think we'll let you lay a finger on him?!” Iris exclaimed,

shocked by their demands, not to mention the dissonance between the fine weapons they wielded and their shabby appearances. There was no reason for a group of unknown thugs to be after Crow's life. And there was no way they could own weapons of a sort so heavily controlled by the state.

Which could only mean...

"You bastards are the emperor's pawns, aren't you?!" Iris exclaimed in explosive anger.

The second she drew her blade, however, the men pointed their own blades at the captive maids. The hostages' screams echoed throughout the estate, giving Iris pause and slowing her movements.

"Now! Get him!" one of the men commanded.

"What?!"

The thugs all advanced at once, their blades about to reach Crow, when—

"IN YOUR DREAMS."

Dark aether gushed forth from Crow's entire body!

Chapter 41: A New Power

“Wha—? Crow?!” Iris watched, bewildered, as the dark aether began to flow from the young man just as his assailants attacked.

Then something even stranger happened. The aether took the shape of countless black arms and seized the men’s weapons!

“Gah! What the hell?!”

“Whoa! Nobody said he could do this shit!”

“Let me go, damn you!”

As the ruffians struggled to free themselves, the captive maids slipped away. And amid the echoing cries of the evildoers, a faint voice rose from within the swirling storm of darkness:

“My desire...is to be...”

Iris’s eyes widened in recognition. There was no mistaking it—this was the voice of the man she loved!

“The Condemner of All Evil, for the sake of others! Shouldering every burden, every responsibility!” he exclaimed passionately.

A knight’s vow.

For his country, his friends, his people—he would slaughter all evil, surpass all obstacles. Thus did the Condemner swear!

“Oh, Crow!”

“My dear young man!”

Iris and Eldia—two women who had taken up the sword in the name of justice—were trembling. His resounding oath burned hot in their hearts.

“Peace... Hope... I’d do anything for that!”

In the overflowing darkness, they all shivered and froze—the women out of emotion, the villainous brutes out of fear! Faced with the absolute determination and fervor of those words, not one of them

so much as blinked.

“I hereby declare that...”

As the dark aether reached a critical mass, the figure of a knight emerged as if from a cocoon of darkness!

“I, Crow Titus, wish to someday sever all that is evil! For freedom and peace!”

Thus did the bringer of judgment make his second coming. At the heart of the crackling blackness stood Crow, the Condemner. He should’ve been severely injured. He should’ve been missing an arm. However, the strange aether, lodged in his injuries like a flame, turned to flesh and blood, replacing what he had lost.

“Oh, Crow!” Iris exclaimed, in tears at his miraculous revival.

The young man exuded a presence that made it seem as though he could’ve stood side by side with the knights in her childhood tales, overcoming all hardships. A hero, born in the modern age!

Buuut...

What the hell?! What’s with these scary-looking dudes? And Iris?! And a tiny loli?!!!

Our modern-age hero (actually just the pointedly ordinary Crow) was confused, you see.

After all, he’d been sleeping like a log, and then Muramasa had told him to shout out his desires—and the next thing he knew, he’d woken up and found himself in this situation.

Huh? Huh?! These clearly evil dudes are glaring right at me! This can’t be good! Uh, I should probably protect the loli!

Standing before the mysterious white-haired girl (actually seventy-year-old Eldia), Crow shielded her with his own body.

And then he put on a stupidly sharp face and spoke in a stupidly sharp tone.

“Never fear. I will protect you!”

“Huh?! ♡”

And that's how, in a single moment, Empress Dowager Eldia was doomed.

See, from *her* point of view, this was a dream come true. A cool, passionate, righteous, and *gorgeous* man—the embodiment of all her ideals—stood protecting her like a scene straight out of a story. Suddenly, she was being treated like a heroine! And she was *swooning* over it!

Except, of course, while she *thought* he was a righteous man (based on hearsay and the series of oaths he'd just made), he wasn't actually like that at all.

What Crow had *said* was “My desire is to be the Condemner of All Evil, for the sake of others! Shouldering every burden, every responsibility! Peace. Hope. I'd do anything for that! I hereby declare that I, Crow Titus, wish to someday sever all that is evil! For freedom and peace!”

What he had *thought*, however, was “**My desire...? Well, honestly, all I want is to be hella popular with the ladies and take it easy! I've been the Condemner of All Evil for the sake of others all this time! Shouldering every burden, every responsibility! I'm sick of it! I wanna move on already and live in peace!!! My hope...is to have a big tiddy wife who takes, like, super good care of me, and also gives me money! I'd do anything for that! Um, except fighting! I hereby declare that I, Crow Titus, wish to someday sever all ties with you, you demonic embodiment of all that is evil! I wish for my freedom and peace back!**”

The shallow bastard! He just wanted peace for himself! All they'd heard had been him articulating bits and pieces of his garbage desires! Just the buzzing of an insect who wanted to get rid of his yandere girlfriend (Muramasa) and find himself a sugar mama he could bang without a care in the world!

Unaware of any of this, Iris and Eldia's maiden brains were in full overdrive, and the ruffians were desperately trying to get away—all over someone who was barely worthy of being called scum.

What they saw as a hero rising from the depths of hell was, in reality, just a slug crawling out of a drain. Gross, and definitely not worth cowering before.

Still, Crow's acting skills and the mystique in his face were top-notch.

Fully aware of the abilities of the demonic sword flowing from his soul to his mind, he glared sharply at his enemies.

“Come, Muramasa! Show me your new power!”

Instantly, the jet-black blade was in Crow’s right hand. His left arm, grown anew, emanated dark aether. Truly, he looked like a hero reborn from the ashes, awakened to an extraordinary power.

As everyone around him trembled (for no reason), Crow raised his left arm. “I invoke ‘Forbidden Art: Wicked Soul Summoning!’” he shouted.

He’d just come up with that name, by the way.

Once again, dark aether began to overflow from his left arm. In a moment, it took shape, transforming into a group of trolls, aetherborn he had once slain.

The demonic army roared. They looked exactly like the real thing, except that their bodies were tinted black. With ragged breaths and murderous eyes like those of angry beasts, they turned to the thugs.

“Wh-What?! Where did these things come from?!” one of the ruffians shouted, as the group of men fell into a panic.

They’d had no idea *this* could happen! Their client—under the emperor’s orders—had told them this was the simple assassination of a man on the verge of death. So what the hell was *this*?!

“This is Muramasa’s new power,” Crow announced, black blade in hand. “It can now cause souls to manifest for a time.” *Cool, right?!*

His left arm regenerating, the summoning of the troll horde—all was the work of the recently awakened Muramasa. Crow’s soul, to which the blade was bound, could recreate his own missing body parts and organs with aether. Not only that, he could also summon fragments of the souls of aetherborn the sword had consumed, temporarily bringing them back to life.

These revived beasts obeyed Crow’s every command—not because they were under his thrall, but because they were simply terrified of Crow and Muramasa, who had once killed them so violently.

“Now go, my aetherborn! Destroy this evil! Cleanse it!”

With a mighty roar, the trolls attacked in unison, swinging their powerful arms and mowing down the thugs. Some still tried to resist, using their aethereal arms, but—

“It’s futile,” said Crow, the man who controlled the aetherborn horde, unfazed. His sword flashed over and over, and the thugs fell one after another, their bodies instantly dismembered.

And the resurrected hero (actually just controlled by a cursed sword), with a look of (pseudo-)dignity on his face, boldly declared:

“Embrace your doom, vile fiends!”

While internally screaming that his muscles were really sore, of course.

He obliterated every last one of his enemies.

“He’s a hero!” Iris said.

“He’s a hero!” Eldia said.

“He’s too strong for us!” the enemies said.

“Wahhhh!” Crow said. What a turd.

Chapter 42: The Mentor, the Teacher, and Crow

After taking care of the evil-looking dudes, I stood there, in awe of the strange white-haired loli's true identity.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, young man. My name is Eldia von Lemuria. I am the emperor's mother."

"Pardon?" *I'm sorry, what?! She's, like, a kid!*

She had to be joking, right?

But when I looked at Iris and made a face like "Can you believe this shit?" she shook her head at me, looking quite serious.

Wait, it's not a joke?!

"It's hard to believe, I understand, but much to my shame, it is true," the young girl said, holding out her left hand. She wore a ring with the royal family's crest on her ring finger. "So as you can see, I am Eldia, wife to the late emperor."

"Oh, I see..." *Whaaaaaaaaaat?!*

An actual royal! In the flesh! And, like, the most important of them all too!

Oh crap! Uh, how am I supposed to talk to royalty? Wait, did I disrespect her earlier?!

"Your Majesty, I was not aware of your identity. I apologize for my lack of manners."

"Oh, no need for formalities. You can call me Eldia."

"Uh, Empress Eldia—?"

"No, just Eldia. And there's no need to mind your manners."

What do you mean, I don't need to mind my manners?! What's with her?! Is this a trap?!

Disobeying her orders and minding my manners would've been treason.

Not minding my manners would've been disrespectful.

Damned if I did and damned if I didn't!

I'd gotten revived, then some thugs had tried to kick my ass a moment later, and five minutes after *that*, I got caught in some weird catch-22!

"Now, now, my mentor, you're putting Crow on the spot." My angel, Iris, chided the empress.

She *chided* the *empress*!

Iris had also called her "mentor," which meant she must've been Eldia's disciple, right? What a beautiful pair!

"I'm sorry, Crow. See, my mentor here may be royalty, but she's quite the tomboy. Try not to think ill of her."

"No, I don't mind, Iris. I can appreciate someone who prefers acting casually to formality."

As I said this, Empress Eldia grinned widely. "Oh? Ohh?"

Wh-What?!

"My, young Crow, you don't call her 'Lady' Iris?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, she asked me not to." *Which this person also did, come to think of it...*

"Oh dear! Iris, your tactics are the same as mine! This can only mean one thing!"

What? Tactics? What tactics? What does that mean?

As I tilted my head in confusion, Empress Eldia smacked Iris on the side of her chest.

And instead of getting angry, Iris went beet red. "W-Well, I can't deny that," she mumbled.

I had no idea what they were going on about, but at least they seemed to have a good relationship!

“Oh, my apologies for ignoring you, young Crow. But if you can be so casual with Iris, why, you can be casual with me too, no?”

I attempted to protest. “B-But Your Majesty, you’re royalty! I couldn’t possibly—”

“Don’t worry, young man. My marriage to the previous emperor was half forced, and political in nature. I may have raised and breastfed two children, but I’m still a maiden at heart.”

What’s she going on about?!

“As proof of my sincerity, I give you this,” she said, removing the ring from her finger and offering it to me.

No thanks!

What the hell? Was this some kind of prank by the royal family? I was, like, the most commoner of all commoners. My mind couldn’t keep up!

“Now, my mentor, shall we speak of serious matters?” Iris cut in, clearing her throat and picking the empress up, then setting her aside like one might do to a pet cat.

“This is a serious matter!” Eldia protested.

“Shut up, loli granny!” Iris snapped. “Now, Crow, allow me to briefly explain our current situation,” she continued, her tone turning solemn.

She then told me about what had happened during my slumber.

First off, I’d been asleep for a week straight.

And I’d been on the verge of multiple organ failure, just like Muramasa had said.

On top of that, Tiana, who had protected me, was doing fine.

Though she had incurred severe injuries, she’d been treated with a powerful potion known as an “elixir,” which only the royal family had access to. Once her life-threatening wounds had fully healed, she’d been left in the care of her mother.

They’d used an elixir on me as well, apparently, but all that had done was keep me alive for a week.

Iris said all of my organs and bones had been damaged. My ass must've been kicked really hard!

“And lastly, about the black dragon you defeated, Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens... Well, the plan is for you to receive a commendation from the emperor himself. But I'm sure you've already put two and two together, haven't you?” Iris asked.

I nodded.

A newbie like me should never have been sent to face off against a dragon alone, of course.

After the dragon was dead, a group of mystery masked men had attacked me.

And then a bunch of thugs wielding aethereal arms had come after me.

It all came together into one grim picture.

“It's Emperor Zilsonia who wants you dead.”

“How *dare* that boy try to harm his future daddy?!”

—Eldia

Chapter 43: Congrats, Crow! It's a Boy!

"I'll keep an eye out for any other assassins the emperor might send," Iris said. "Please, my mentor, tell Crow about him."

With that, Iris left the room, sword in hand. Her blonde hair trailing behind her gave her such a dignified look. She'd been so dependable since the moment we met! I loved her.

"Now, young Crow," the empress began, once we were alone. "Let us speak of the emperor, the man after your life." Her long eyelashes drooped sadly. "Why did Zilsonia, my son, try to kill you, you may ask? Well, he resents commoners who show excellence."

Um, I'm not excellent, but go off, I guess?

"My son, Zilsonia, you see, was quite the talented child. Everyone around him expected him to achieve great things. Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—my husband and I had no other children. Until age ten, everyone believed Zilsonia was to be the next emperor."

"Until age ten?" I echoed, tilting my head at her words.

He'd had no siblings. He'd been talented. Seemed obvious to me he'd become the next emperor.

"Well..." she began, in response to my question. "Around that time, I learned of my husband's infidelity. He had sired a child with one of our maids."

"Oh, I see." *Sounds like a bit of a pickle*, I thought. Even someone like me, a commoner far removed from that world, could imagine the problems *that* had to have caused for those involved.

"As you can imagine, the palace was in an uproar. Some of our vassals even went so far as to suggest that the child should be killed to prevent the seeds of chaos from taking root. It was a difficult time." Empress Eldia sighed.

She might've looked like a seven-year-old, but this story was pretty serious. And she'd mentioned being half forced into a political marriage to boot. She looked so young, but she'd led quite the difficult

life.

“In the end, the maid’s child was raised at the palace, as the second in line to the throne. There was opposition, to be sure, but Zilsonia, in the eye of the storm, said he would accept the boy as a younger brother. The two became playmates and were often together after the boy was taken in.”

“I see.” *Wow!* How nice of Emperor Zilsonia to have just accepted a potential rival like that!

Once it became known the boy was the child of the emperor, there would have been problems even if he’d lived as a commoner. Taking him into the palace was the best course of action. And he’d have a good older brother too.

“Empress Eldia...” I began.

“Just Eldia, please. And remember to *not* mind your manners.”

I know! You don’t have to remind me!

“So then, Eldia. Why did Emperor Zilsonia grow to resent commoners?”

“It’s quite simple, really,” she explained, straining to get the words out. “The second prince was simply far too excellent.”

Apparently, this second prince—just one year younger than Zilsonia—had caught up to his older brother’s academic knowledge about a year after being taken in. Not only that, he’d had talent in the military arts and had surpassed his older brother in only three months. To add insult to injury, he’d been a beautiful child, adored as an angel in his youth. And once he’d grown up, he’d become a handsome, golden-haired man, fascinating the upper-class ladies.

Wow, having a total superhuman for a younger brother must’ve been hard to deal with.

“And the rest isn’t difficult to imagine. The expectations of those around them began to shift onto his younger brother, and Zilsonia was completely overshadowed,” she went on. “Which isn’t to say he was mediocre by any means, but with such formidable competition, he didn’t stand a chance. Over time, his personality began to warp.”

“So,” I pondered, “he began to resent others like his younger

brother? Commoners who excel?"

The empress nodded at my words. "He's now become a bitter old man," she lamented, clearly distraught by her son's fate.

Oh, so that's what it is. It made sense. The emperor hated his younger brother, and his attempts to have me killed had happened because of some sort of displaced hatred for his sibling.

Maybe it wasn't appropriate for me to feel this way, having been on the verge of death because of him and all, but I could sympathize with his feelings. Even if he *was* a bastard and undeserving of forgiveness.

"I understand," I remarked. "I don't plan on forgiving him, but I'll consider him a pitiful scoundrel instead."

"Oh, thank you! You're far too kind!" Eldia exclaimed, seeming a little relieved by my response.

Wow, what a jerk! Making his pretty, petite mother sad!

"I assume it would be difficult to make the emperor change his ways?" I asked.

"My apologies," the empress said. "I tried to put an end to his schemes once I found out, and repeatedly admonished him not to do it, but...he didn't listen to me, in the end."

"An unfortunate situation for you to be in," I concluded. "Incidentally, Eldia, is the former emperor still alive? Perhaps if the reprimand came from him, there would be more of a political pressure for the emperor to not do anything."

Meaning, I wanted his daddy to scold him.

Eldia shook her head, however. "Unfortunately, my late husband has already passed. I think the same thing often. Zilsonia was fond of his father, so if the former emperor was still alive, he could certainly scold the emperor."

I see. So he's dead. That doesn't work, then.

The empress's face fell again. It was hard to sit by and watch a girl who looked no older than seven seem like she was about to cry.

All righty then. As the master of empathy, my personal motto is to always be nice to little girls.

Time to lighten the mood with a joke!

“How about this, then, Eldia?” I said, taking a ring out of my pocket—the same ring with the royal crest that she’d given me earlier as a joke.

I then slipped it onto my left ring finger.

“Y-Young man?!” she exclaimed.

A perfect fit! I’d thought since a little girl had been wearing it, it’d be too tight, but oh well.

And then, gesturing at my now ringed finger, I offered Eldia a small smile.

“I’ll reprimand the emperor as his substitute father. That would help him be a good boy again, don’t you think?”

Eldia was *stunned*.

Ha! How’s that?! Imagine someone as young as me playing the role of angry father, yelling at the emperor about how foolish he is! He’d probably start foaming at the mouth!

Funny, right?

I expected her to laugh, but—

“C-C-Crow! You know what this means, yes?!”

“Huh?”

“You’ll be as a father to him. You’ll scold him. You know what that means, don’t you?!” she asked, creeping closer to me for some reason. A tear trickled down her worried face.

What was *that* about?

“P-Please, Crow! I’m at my limit!” she exclaimed, as though she were hanging by a thread to avoid falling straight into hell.

She took my ringed hand in her small ones and clasped it tightly.

“Please, do help me scold that foolish son of mine!”

“Oh, of course...” *Wait, what? You can’t be serious!*

And thus it was decided that, in a few days, I was to scold a son (Eldia's, specifically) who I'd never met.

Whaaaaaat?!

A few days later...

Eldia said, "Mommy will be marrying this man. ♡"

Zilsonia, who had been trying to kill said man—a man who, incidentally, now wore a ring with the royal crest and stood before him—said, "Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

Chapter 44: A Late-Night Visitor

“Man, what the hell...?” I grumbled.

The sun had set, and I’d finally gotten a proper meal and bath. But I still felt pretty down as I lay sprawled out on the bed I’d been provided.

“I can’t believe she actually went with my stupid ‘scold the emperor’ joke!”

Yep. My joke had gone right over the head of Empress Dowager Eldia. In fact, she’d thought it was a great idea. And gone with it. Seriously!

Like, hello?! Come on, man! How was a common village dude like me supposed to reprimand royalty?!

Not to mention... “Do it ‘boldly’? In front of everybody?! How the hell am I supposed to do that?!”

Just thinking about it made my stomach drop.

Empress Eldia had said I was to receive a public commendation from the emperor and was supposedly making arrangements for the ceremony to take place at the heart of the imperial capital.

That meant I was going to have to meet the emperor in front of tens of thousands of people.

This alone made me nauseous from anxiety, but having to *scold* him on top of that?! There was *no* way.

“Ugh. I’m an introvert! Why do *I* have to do this?! I wanna go home,” I whined, rolling around in bed.

Oh well. I was sure the emperor was gonna lose his shit. And people were gonna stare at me like, “What’s this guy’s problem?”

See, I had apparently become the talk of the country.

Everyone was convinced I was some kind of heroic badass. It turned out the dragon I’d killed was this legendary, powerful thing called Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens, or whatever.

But you know, if I let that get to my head and started talking big to people above me in the food chain, everyone would be like, “Who does this loser think he is?” and such, wouldn’t they?

“Man, people at the capital are gonna throw rocks at me. To city people, I’m just a hick from the boonies.”

All I had to my name was knighthood. Otherwise, I was just some nobody without any authority. A country bumpkin going around talking big, grand achievements or no, was gonna catch a lot of flak.

A dog’s still a dog no matter how strong it is, you know? Without status or authority, biting the hands of my masters would make me an infuriating, dangerous mongrel who doesn’t know its place.

“Man, if only I married into a noble family, or something.”

Status adds dignity to your image, you know. Whether or not you’re a village boy by birth, if you climb up the ladder, people start saying it was “circumstance” and “effort” that got you there.

The words of a village nobody and the words of a villager who got themselves a noble family crest carried totally different weights.

So, if I’d married into the royal family or something, that’d have been, like, the climax of a story.

“If some villager is stern to the emperor, it’s ‘lèse-majesté,’ which is a crime. But if a noble does it, it’s ‘sage advice.’”

Now, if a member of the royal family opposes the emperor? That’s “overthrowing tyranny.” It’s like saying, “I will never acknowledge you as our ruler. I will not stand for your reign. I will drag you down from your throne.”

And if that person originally came from common stock, well, all the more exciting for the audience, right?

People tended to side with those in power who they related to. They might have hated others of their same social status rising to the top, but they sure loved it when someone at the top shared their roots, their hobbies, their tastes.

“People are complex creatures,” Fukashi, my one friend back home (later eaten by aetherborn and now deceased), had always said.

You know, he hadn't amounted to much, but he'd always talked big.

Well, anyway...

"Shape it up, Crow! Face reality! You haven't married into a noble family! You're just some virgin loser who's never even had a girlfriend!" I scolded myself, bringing myself back down to earth. My tears started anew.

Reality was cruel. I, a virgin and a commoner, now had to scold the emperor (a man over thirty years my senior, by the way) in front of everyone. He'd probably be furious, and everyone else would think I was a menace.

I'd thought about declining, of course, but Empress Eldia had seemed so excited about it. Besides, it had been my suggestion initially, so...backing out now would've been pretty bad, wouldn't it? *Sigh.*

"Well, maybe Empress Eldia will cover for me. Yeah. I'll at least avoid execution. I hope."

Ugh, enough! Thinking about my bleak future just made me bawl like a baby. I was going to sleep!

And so, I dispelled my left arm.

"Phew. Man, it's weird to not have a limb," I mused, staring at where my missing arm had been severed at the shoulder.

Muramasa's new ability "soul materialization," which the weapon had received when it evolved, was powerful. It could summon aetherborn, and it could make up for my missing body parts by materializing my own soul.

Maintaining that materialization, however, cost a significant amount of aether.

"The winds from Vita's weapon, the light from Iris's sword, they all come from the aether stored in their ethereal arms too," I pondered.

That was why neither of them could keep those things going *whoosh whoosh shing shing* all the time. They had to wait for their weapons to reabsorb aether from the environment.

Which meant I had to be mindful of that from now on.

Paying attention to this was even more important in my case, since if Muramasa ran out of aether, I was toast.

“Muramasa’s patching up my torn organs too. It’s my literal lifeline,” I murmured to myself, looking at the black sword sitting in the corner of the room.

It was sound asleep now, filled to the brim with the dragon’s soul.

“Wow, I’m here losing my shit over the emperor and this guy’s just snoozing.”

Selfish idiot sword.

Well, whatever. Future me could handle future problems. Present me was going to sleep.

G’night!

As I fell asleep, I thought I heard Iris’s voice. “Crow? Are you asleep?”

While Crow wept in his room, Iris visited her mentor, Eldia, at the latter’s private chambers.

“My mentor— No, Eldia,” she cried, glaring at the empress under the dim light of the fireplace. Throwing etiquette to the wind, she growled, “How *dare* you accept Crow’s proposal!”

Sure, maybe it was a crime to be disrespectful to the empress, but did Iris care? No. Status, honor—none of that mattered. Even her gratitude for having been entrusted with the ultimate aethereal arm, Excalibur, was cast onto the back burner.

“I *know* that, while I was away, Crow suggested becoming the emperor’s father—that is, your *husband*—to dethrone the emperor and lead the country to peace. And you accepted! How *could* you?!”

Indeed. It had been announced during mealtime earlier that such an arrangement had been made between Eldia and Crow, all while Iris had been on patrol duty at the estate.

“What the hell?! Don’t *fuck* with me, you...you...!” Iris trailed off,

sobs of anger and sadness escaping her as she grabbed Eldia's slender shoulders and glared at the empress.

But, well...

"Iris, Iris. Blame me all you like. But you understand, don't you? This is the path of righteousness," Eldia replied, unflinching.

Choked up, Iris found herself unable to speak.

Accepting Iris's sorrow and condemnation of her actions, Eldia gazed at her pupil and continued, "Crow is a wise man. Surely he grasps the current state of the empire. We're on the brink of collapse, Iris."

Eldia let out a deep sigh as she continued. She could almost hear them—the sounds of the nation collapsing, like a decrepit building falling apart. "The dark magus organization, Wanpurgis, has created a situation in which a great number of aetherborn are flooding in toward the imperial capital. By itself, that's already a major problem," she pondered aloud.

The chaos among the people was unprecedented. Before the attack by Wanpurgis, the denizens of the capital and its adjacencies had completely forgotten the terror of living in a world rife with aetherborn. Spanning several hundred kilometers around the capital, the inner zone had once been a sacred area, free of monsters. Surrounded on all sides by a massive wall, it had remained peaceful—until now.

"The myth of peace has been dispelled. Though the people haven't risen in revolt yet, who knows what might happen if even just one weak aetherborn breaches the capital?" Eldia mused, her face turning pale.

It was a frightening prospect, no doubt about it. Unlike Crow and others from the outer zone, the people of the inner zone had never seen a single aetherborn. The degree of panic that would ensue defied imagination.

"And despite this, my son, the *emperor*, is still only concerned with oppressing the common folk! I know, I *know* that as a mother I shouldn't be saying such things, but how could I possibly have given birth to such a child?!" Eldia lamented, frantically tearing at her hair.

"Eldia..." Iris trailed off. Seeing the empress at her breaking point

left the knight at a loss for words.

Eldia was at her limit too, having spent much of her life watching as her child, born from a loveless union, did nothing but bring misfortune to his own people. “And then, that blasted dragon appeared!” she bemoaned. Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens, who was supposed to have been sealed away by the royal family, had descended upon the inner zone. News of its arrival and subsequent subjugation had spread like wildfire among the people.

“First, its appearance sowed chaos among the populace. Then, its defeat at the hands of a single young man shocked them. If that was all there was to it, this would’ve been cause for celebration, but...”

Reality was not as simple as that. Many wondered about young Crow’s victory over the dragon. Why had he been sent to hunt it alone? As those who knew of the event had begun looking into this matter, they’d discovered that Emperor Zilsonia himself had forced Crow to fight the dragon alone, specifically forbidding him from bringing allies.

Thus, distrust toward the emperor was at an all-time high. Even when aetherborn had threatened the inner zone, the old man’s only concern had been with destroying a young man. He was an incompetent who’d unwittingly brought back a beast meant to be sealed away. A wretched old man whose sole aim was to prevent commoners from moving up the ranks.

Now his true nature had been laid bare in the eyes of the people.

“Our nation is on the verge of splitting apart. It’s teeming with those who call for the dethronement of the emperor—with no regard for the chaos that would ensue—and with those who seek to take the throne for themselves. Even in the face of the aetherborn and an organization of dark magi lurking in the shadows, people’s hearts are torn!”

Eldia would seize upon any method to overturn this situation.

“You understand, don’t you, Iris?” Eldia asked.

“I-I do,” Iris replied tearfully, nodding. From the moment Eldia, former bearer of the holy sword, had presented a ring to Crow, Iris had understood perfectly.

“Crow Titus is a hero. A dragonslayer. Taking him as my husband

and making him into a symbol of this nation is the best course of action!”

At those words, before Eldia’s golden gaze, Iris fell silent.

Compatibility with the holy sword Excalibur required a heart strongly attuned to justice. And Eldia, so compatible with the sword that it had stopped her aging altogether, would do anything she deemed to be right, even at the cost of shattering her disciple’s heart.

“Crow is a smart man. I’m certain he understood my gift of the ring as a tactic to protect the nation. If he hadn’t liked the idea, he could’ve simply taken it in stride and returned the ring. I left that path open. But he...”

The young swordsman had accepted the ring. Iris knew how intelligent Crow was. He must’ve come to a realization about how to best bring the nation together.

“Oh, Crow,” Iris lamented, recalling how, during their meal together, Crow’s face had frozen when Eldia had announced their plan.

At first glance, one might’ve thought he’d just been shocked, but no. He had worn, without a doubt, the look of a man who had resolved to sacrifice his life. He’d been bracing himself for what he had to do so firmly that he hadn’t been able to move a muscle.

“Forgive me, Iris. I know this is cruel to you. You love this man. And so, if you cannot find it in your heart to forgive me, I would have you cut me down—right here, right now,” Eldia declared.

Iris, however, made no movement to reach for the holy sword. How could she cut her mentor down? It was the emperor’s fault for causing such unrest in the nation that his mother had had to resort to this.

Not only that, her dear Crow had consented to Eldia’s plan.

“I, Iris Zehirete,” she began, dropping to one knee even as her tears continued to fall in large drops, “vow to do everything within my power to make Crow Titus—the Dragonslayer—emperor of Lemuria!” With determination, she made a resounding pledge, a knight’s oath, to establish Crow as the new pillar of their nation.

Even if that meant she could never be with the man she loved.

Buuut—

“Empress Eldia told me to, like, ‘show the people justice by scolding Zilsonia in place of his deceased father!’” Crow said with a long sigh, rolling around on the bed. “Man, doesn’t that mean she’s asking me to chastise a much older man in front of a bunch of folks?! Dude, I don’t wanna do that! That’s *awkward!*”

Completely unaware of Iris’s resolute vow, the man at the center of it all was fretting over something completely superficial! Moreover, Crow, from his own perspective, had just been joking that he’d scold the emperor in place of his father. But somehow everyone had taken him seriously! He had no deeper awareness of the danger the nation was in, nor did he know that Eldia was at the end of her rope.

So while he might not have been the absolute dullest tool in the shed, he *was* the unparalleled gold medalist of incorrect assumptions.

And he doubled as the champion of awful timing to boot.

This present situation was the result.

“C’mon, Empress Eldia! A joke’s a joke! Why so serious?!”

This twice-crowned king of idiocy had decided to pull a gag that could be interpreted as a marriage proposal *right* as things were reaching a critical point—and Eldia had seen no other means to bring the nation together other than marrying his idiot ass.

And so, from Eldia’s perspective, he’d looked like someone who was willing to become her fiancé, pass judgment on the emperor, and become the new leader of the nation.

Good job, genius.

The nation was at its limit, on the brink of a terrible, explosive future. It was the worst possible time for this utter, abject moron, at the limit of his stupidity, to turn to a justice-loving widow, also at her limit, and go like, “What’s wrong? Wanna talk?”

And now the history of the empire was about to take an absolutely ridiculous turn.

Future historians might record this as *the* moment a grand step forward was taken, when in reality it was a stupid, meaningless act—on par with an old man unconsciously tapping his foot.

“Man, I was at a shop one time, and this young manager was giving an older part-timer a real hard time, and that was so awkward. What will I even say?” Crow—the man, mind you, who could dictate the future of this nation—continued to fret over matters so shallow a bacterium couldn’t drown in them.

And thus, after several minutes of rolling around, worrying about this and that, thinking of his (late) friend Fukashi’s words, he finally was out like a light.

“Oh, Crow,” said Iris. “Giving up your life to bring a nation together... Are you trying to become a savior?”

“Forgive me, young man,” said Eldia. “But this country will be saved, thanks to you!”

“Wahhh!” said Crow. What a turd.

Chapter 45: Infatuation (Starring ???)

In the dark of the moonless night, Iris Zehirete visited Crow's room.

"Crow? Are you asleep?"

No reply came from the other side of the door. The room's occupant was already slumbering, Iris figured. She gently and quietly pushed the door open.

"Crow..."

With small, silent steps, she approached the sleeping form on the bed.

He must've been quite tired. Dead to the world, he showed no signs of stirring.

"It makes sense," she murmured quietly. "He'd barely woken up from almost dying and immediately had to fight."

As she gently stroked his raven locks, a pained smile formed upon her features at the thought of what a hardworking young man he was. The slightly coarse texture of his hair felt pleasant to the touch.

This past week, she'd been wiping his hair whenever she could, to prevent it from becoming damp with sweat.

Iris chuckled. "How cruel this all is, Crow! You're always on my mind! We'd confessed to one another just recently, and yet..." She trailed off, shedding tears she didn't think she still had as she thought of the day when they'd strolled through Salem City.

Not a month had passed, and yet it felt like such a long time ago.

"There, on that day, we both spoke of our love for one another! How could you marry my mentor, you idiot?" she grieved, her emotions overflowing.

Iris was falling to pieces. She knelt by the bed, burying her face in Crow's chest as he remained fast asleep.

“Why? Why has it come to this?!”

She knew why, of course. It must’ve been a bitter decision for Crow as well, offering himself up to a royal woman in order to bring the nation together. Iris would never have been able to do the same thing.

“Please, Crow! Be my lover, just for tonight!” she pleaded, straddling him. She knew full well how shameful this was. She’d sworn in front of Eldia that she would endeavor to see Crow on the throne. She’d vowed to set aside her feelings for him.

And yet, here she was. Heat rushed to her body where her skin touched his. Deep within her, the desire for her beloved welled up.

“Oh, Crow, please forgive me!” she exclaimed as she lowered herself to him and let out a soft moan.

Her ample bosom tingled as it pressed against him. His scent filled her nostrils, making her mind swim.

This is bad, she knew. It was like a drug. Before she knew it, she was panting heavily, burying her face in Crow’s neck.

Iris’s arousal only grew as she breathed him in, and she cried out, her body shuddering. His powerful, overwhelming aroma gave her goose bumps, making her back arch as it sent shivers down her spine. The smell of the man she loved was simply bewitching.

It was as though the depths of her lungs were being filled with a sweet poison, lowering her inhibitions, rendering her unable to hold back her desire.

“*Do it*,” a sickly-sweet voice echoed from her womb to her brain.

“Crow! Oh, Crow!” she exclaimed, unable to bear it any longer. Iris had reached her limit.

Even if just for one night, she *wanted* him.

“Crow!”

But then, as she leaned in to steal a kiss from the sleeping young man...

“C-Crow... I... *Aaaugh!* What’s wrong with me?!” She suddenly sprang up and forcefully struck the soft bed, breathing heavily. “Ugh, I’m so disgusted with myself!” she exclaimed, spilling tears of self-

loathing.

The moment she had dared to initiate that foul kiss, the image of Crow's face loomed clearly in her mind.

He wasn't even in his twenties yet, and his youthful features were easily mistaken for a boy's. Yet, despite his youth, he was prepared to sacrifice himself for his country. What on *Earth* was she trying to do to him?!

The moment she realized this, Iris's wits returned to her.

"I'm sorry, Crow! I'm so sorry!" she pleaded tearfully, stroking him and getting down from the bed.

Quietly, she turned to leave the room. She would never make the same mistake again. This time, truly resolute, she placed her hand on the doorknob.

"Please forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive the folly of a lowly knight!" she begged sternly.

Those were not the words of a woman in love with Crow, but a request from Iris the knight, who had decided to make him emperor.

"Rest well, my future emperor. I will defend your chosen path with all I have!"

With renewed determination, Iris disappeared down the corridor. And as she did so, she steeled her resolve to set aside her womanly pursuits. Plus, well, you know.

"ZZZZZZZZ... ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ..."

The young man who was "prepared to sacrifice himself for his country" was still fast asleep, completely unaware of *any* of this.

As per usual, the very avatar of obliviousness. Since, you know, Iris *thought* they'd confessed their feelings to one another, but from Crow's perspective, they'd simply declared their mutual affection as mentor and disciple.

So they weren't on the same page. They weren't even on the same book.

Iris Zehirete had steeled her resolve for no reason whatsoever.

nature.

“Oh, he still breathes! Sir Crow, you yet live!” she exclaimed, her voluptuous form crawling like a dog toward the young man. Tears spilled in large drops from her narrow eyes, leaving damp streaks on her face like a slug might.

“Sir Croooooow!”

The reason this widow was so desperate was that she was convinced it was her own fault that Crow was on the brink of death.

“Th-That day, when you were given the mission to kill the dragon, I should’ve used my position as commander to protect you! If only I had, you...” She trailed off, gripping Crow’s hand tightly, bringing his arm to her sizable assets and nuzzling the back of his hand with her cheek. Her tears would not stop coming. “Oh, you’re dying, and it’s all my fault!”

Fiana was troubled over why a young man, at the peak of his virility, had to die tonight—a question that had come too late.

Yeah, she was *completely* unaware of the current situation. Last thing she’d heard, Crow was going to die today. She’d visited him when her daughter Tiana had been entrusted to her care, and she’d never have dreamed that he’d later awaken to strange powers and survive.

“Oh, Sir Crow, my poor Sir Crow! Please, resent me! I’m but a stupid, incompetent woman, mature in body only! Curse my name!” End-of-her-rope Widow Number Two pleaded, clinging dramatically to the young man.

It had taken Iris only a minute to cling to Crow after entering his room, but Fiana had topped that with an astounding new record of twenty-eight seconds. Truly the winner of the first division of the degeneracy championship.

“Oh! The scar where your arm was torn pains me so! Your breathing is...well, it’s rather quiet, actually, but that *must* mean you lack the vitality to even wheeze! Oh, my heart!” she lamented, having no idea whatsoever that Crow was already well.

The fact he’d dispelled his left arm to conserve aether didn’t help either.

If only she'd walked in through the front door of the estate, she could've learned about Crow's condition from Eldia or Iris.

"Heh... Heh heh heh heh... Ah, Sir Crow, I must apologize for using my Hades to sneak through the shadows to get to you." In the darkness, the gem on her chest, dark as night, glowed faintly.

It was called Hades, the Concealer. The gem had been crafted from part of the helmet of the lord of the underworld, and allowed its bearer to become one with the darkness. With this in hand, sneaking into the dimly lit estate had been trivial.

Why had she done that, you ask?

"Sir Crow, I will take responsibility for my mistake!"



Reaching for her top, Fiana yanked it off with no hesitation whatsoever.

She moved to straddle the young man, barely half her age, and exposed her ample curves to the darkness.

“I cannot let your life end without a legacy. And so, even knowing nobody can ever find out about this... Oh, Sir Crow!”

Determined, Fiana vigorously stole a kiss from Crow.

Their lips met, their hot breaths mixing with the air over the bed. The young man’s bedroom turned into a love nest as the two intertwined.

“Mmm... ♡”

Fiana firmly clinched the fastest time from being alone with Crow to kissing him!

The only other one who had gotten this far had been her daughter, Tiana, but it had taken her hours to kiss him after she’d found herself alone with him in a bedroom.

Unlike her daughter, who had taken the time to do slow and tedious things such as eat dinner, this woman had reached his lips in a minute!

She was now the winner of the *second* division of the degeneracy championship as well. It was the birth of a garbage (times two) woman.

And she’d managed to pull off a criminal-mastermind-level (like, actually a crime) move worth a gajillion technical points by successfully breaking into the empress dowager’s estate and sneaking into a man’s bedroom in the middle of the night. Truly the play of the game.

Sadly, there was no audience to cheer her on, besides the future children thunderously applauding from her ovaries. Could she please just reach menopause already? Thanks.

“Now, Sir Crow, please—leave me a legacy! It’ll be proof that you once lived! Allow me to take on this responsibility!”

And thus did their two silhouettes intertwine.

Fiana (a thirty-six-year-old mother) went all out with Crow (who was underage, by the way), committing an act a certain female knight had managed to refrain from.

With astounding speed too, despite her daughter Tiana having

taken hours to build up to a kiss.

Triumphantly, Fiana clinched the win for the third division of the degeneracy championship. The garbage (times three) queen of debauchery took her crown.

She picked up the pace.

“Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow! Forgive me, Sir Crow!!!”

With every apology, the shadow cast on the wall doubled in speed.

And then, as she tossed aside the ring from her marriage to her late husband (political, by the way, *and* he’d been a womanizer, often spending time with his mistresses instead of loving Fiana), her output surged even further beyond.

With a loud *crack*, the bed collapsed at last.

“Sir Croooooow!” she cried out.

His aethereal arms, which had been secretly observing the act from the corner of the room, shuddered at this display of vitality, this spark of life, and exclaimed, “**WOW. SO THIS IS THE POWER OF MANKIND.**” And the arms, which had viewed humans as little more than food, considered reaching a mutual understanding with humanity.

“Sir Crow! Sir Crow! Please forgive me, Sir Croooooow!”

“Zzzzzzz?!” *Gah! Why does it feel like my energy’s being sucked right out of me?!*

The queen’s roar echoed in the darkness, along with the shriek of her prey as he was devoured.

Fiana felt deeply contrite toward said prey (Crow, that is).

Even as she committed a full course of criminal activities, from breaking into a royal estate to violating her daughter’s teenaged friend, her heart remained filled to the brim with devotion.

Surely her purity of spirit was the source of her strength.

She attacked Crow for the same reason as her daughter—the earnest wish to nurture the seed of a man on the brink of death. But Fiana, who despite her position as commander had sent the young man straight to his demise, felt it many times more strongly than Tiana.

And thus, as a widow at the end of her rope, Fiana was unstoppable.

Unlike Iris, she wasn't crushed by guilt. No, she was deluding herself into thinking that she was *doing the right thing*.

“Sir Crooow!”

“ZZZZZZ?! I'm witheriiiiiiiiing!!!

Thus was the twice-crowned king of idiocy, oblivious to everything, completely devoured by the thrice-crowned queen of debauchery, even more oblivious to anything.

It was the hour of reckoning, in a way.

The next day, Fiana approached the empress.

“Good day, Your Majesty. Has Sir Crow passed on?” she asked.

“Oh! Crow? He woke up the other day with a mysterious power! He's doing quite well, actually! Although he *did* seem quite drained this morning.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Fiana exclaimed in shock, clutching her belly, feeling it heavy in her palm.

“What is it, Fiana? Are you not happy about Crow's recovery?” Eldia asked, puzzled.

“Oh! Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not it at *all*, Your Majesty!” she said in a panic, vigorously waving one hand to dispel the misunderstanding and clutching her lower abdomen with the other.

What? He's safe?! Then what do I do about this?

And thus did anguish dawn on the thrice-crowned queen.

“Man, I want a rich, busty, gorgeous girlfriend!” Crow said. What a turd.

“I’m going to break into the royal estate, sneak into my daughter’s underage friend’s room, and...!” Fiana said. What a turd.

And everyone got what they wanted! Huzzah!!!

Chapter 46: The Emperor Rises

It had been a week since Crow Titus had awoken—and each day, Emperor Zilsonia’s complexion had worsened.

Today, once again, he slouched on his throne, listening to the prime minister’s report.

“I must apologize, Your Majesty. The matter of Crow’s eradication is—”

“Another failure, I assume,” the emperor cut in.

All hope was lost. Day after day after day, his minions had failed. Apart from that first attempt, they hadn’t even managed to get close to Crow at all.

The emperor had completely lost faith in Prime Minister Superbius.

“Enough. Superbius, you are to appoint your successor at once.”

“Wha— Your Majesty?!”

“Your son is not an option, incidentally. I am permanently banishing your family from taking part in government affairs.”

“What?! Your Majesty! This is far too cruel! Have we not served you faithfully all these years?!” the minister protested tearfully.

Ignoring his cries, Zilsonia stood. His hands trembled with revulsion. He had been unable to eliminate Crow, and now the day had finally arrived—the day when he, the emperor and a royal, would have to extol that insignificant, filthy commoner. The day he’d have to conduct a public commendation ceremony to celebrate that man’s achievements. He had no choice but to take part in this nightmare that his mother, Eldia, had concocted.

This nightmare that his people had high hopes for.

“Y-Your Majesty, please, wait! This is all Iris of the White Blade’s fault!” the prime minister pleaded, clinging to Zilsonia’s feet as he wept.

He, too, was in a desperate situation. Superbius had been a faithful

dog of the tyrannical emperor for many years, all to secure his own prosperity and that of his descendants. He held on tightly, unable to bear the thought of losing the decades of time and effort he'd devoted to this.

"I-It's that woman's fault! She's lurking around the empress dowager's estate at all hours, preventing my men from reaching Crow!"

"Silence," Zilsonia commanded.

"Damn her!" the minister continued. "I tried to legally force her to leave the estate, but she ignored every one of my summonses! Such impudence! Yes, it's all her fault! All of it!"

"What part of 'silence' did you not understand?!" the emperor snapped as his anger reached its peak. Clutching his golden scepter, he raised it overhead and forcefully brought it down on the prime minister's skull.

The minister groaned in pain as gray matter spewed forth from both the wound and his ears. His aging, infirm frame convulsed, and his limbs contorted in an unsightly dance.

It was clearly a fatal blow, but the emperor's rage did not abate. Over and over and over and over, he brought the golden scepter down on the prime minister's head.

"Die! Die! Die, die! All you incompetent fools who exist only to torment me must die!"

Superbius screamed, groaned, and sputtered as Zilsonia's angry shouts echoed in the throne room. With each cry, the beautiful scepter was dyed a deeper crimson, coated in more and more of the minister's blood.

"P-Please," the victim pleaded, "Sto— I-I have— My beloved son— I don't want...to die!"

"I don't caaaaaare!" his assailant shrieked.

With one final, particularly powerful blow, the prime minister's movements ceased at last.

"Haah... Haah... Haaaaaaah..." This was the moment that Emperor Zilsonia crossed a line as a ruler. He had killed many people before,

but they had all been commoners. A noble, and a loyal servant at that? This was the first time.

Still, he was unrepentant. “Have you learned your lesson, Superbius?!”

The emperor was now a murderer. In a fit of rage, he had killed his faithful minister of many years.

He was now a true tyrant.

“Haah... Damn you, dirtying my royal scepter with your filthy blood,” said Zilsonia, entirely unconcerned with Superbius’s corpse.

And that was when the golden scepter gleamed, emanating aethereal light.

“Wh-What is this?! It’s casting a spell on its own!”

The scepter had been passed down in the royal family for generations. It was something they called a “perfect aethereal arm”—one that had remained intact through the ages. Ordinarily, aethereal weapons were refined from parts of legendary equipment. This perfect arm, however, had remained pristine since the era of the gods.

Thus, the scepter was seen as the rightful heritage of the emperor of Lemuria. But it had been no more than a treasure. Its true name and abilities remained unknown.

There’d been those who had tried to uncover its mysteries, of course. Due to its nature as a royal treasure, however, more ambitious experiments had not been possible. The details remained unclear.

“Hngh! What’s happening?! This is...”

The golden light emitted from the staff traveled to the body of the recently murdered minister, causing it to morph.

With a gruesome sound, the minister’s corpse began to dissolve. In the blink of an eye, his flesh liquefied. Before long, even his bones and hair melted away.

“Oh! Ohhh!”

All that was left before the stunned emperor was the prime minister’s robe, soaked in his liquid remains.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha ha!” At this display of power, Zilsonia burst into laughter. “Oh, my marvelous scepter! Who would’ve thought it could dissolve people?! With this... With this, I can...!”

Finally, a light appeared at the end of the tunnel of his disgrace! He could completely obliterate that abominable commoner, Crow Titus. Not even a corpse would remain!

The emperor chuckled maniacally. “Well, well. Time to be magnanimous and celebrate our beloved hero!”

Clutching his golden scepter tightly, he headed for the public commendation ceremony, no longer disgusted by the thought of participating. Instead, he resolved to sing the young man’s praises to the skies, if only it meant he could obliterate Crow forever.

Why, the emperor might even confess to his attempts at assassinating the swordsman and bow his head tearfully.

And then...

“As soon as he lets his guard down, I’ll use the scepter’s power and destroy him once and for all!” he declared, confident that his plan would work.

After all, not even the royal family knew what powers the scepter had. So there was no way Crow would know. Surely the young man would assume the emperor was a weakling, unable to fight for himself.

And Zilsonia would use that misconception to his advantage. He would kill that pest.

“Victory will be mine in the end, Crow Titus!” he declared, cackling loudly as he walked out of the throne room.

Thus did he advance toward the stage of the final battle—fully unaware that on that detestable commoner’s finger was the ring of his mother, Eldia.

Chapter 47: The New Emperor Rises

“Is that Crow Titus?!”

“What a gallant visage!”

“It’s the mythical Dragonslayer! The hero of our era!”

How had things gotten to this point?

A week after I’d woken up, the entire capital was holding a “public commendation ceremony” or some such thing in my honor.

Both sides of the main street were lined with crowds, gathered around the long-as-fuck red carpet I was walking on. It felt like a parade!

“Sir Crow!”

“Look this way!”

“Eek! He’s so stoic! He must have so much on his mind!”

Yeah, like going home and stuffing my face full of buns.

My heart had been thrumming in my chest the whole time.

Reminder: I was a reclusive country bumpkin! Until very recently, I’d lived in Bumfuck Nowhere with no more than a couple dozen families! How the hell was I supposed to just casually stride along the heart of the empire, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of watchful eyes?

And, of course, there was another little problem.

“*MILDLY EVIL SOULS EVERYWHERE! A BANQUET!*” gushed the dumb, willful, murderous sword at my hip.

Well, at least Muramasa was eating his boxed dragon soul lunch in my inner world, so its hunger was quelled. Still, it wouldn’t stop twitching.

“You calm down! If you make me draw you here, you’ll cause mass panic! Quit it!”

“Oh, it’s the Dragonslayer!” a knight exclaimed. “Such fighting spirit!”

“Mm-hmm,” another chimed in. “As someone also versed in the art of war, it’s clear to me that he’s always ready to reach for the blade at his waist.”

“How has he refined his skills so much at such a young age?” a third wondered.

Wow, even these knights guarding the parade think highly of me! And they look experienced too!

They were *wrong*, though! I wasn’t ready to draw my sword if necessary—I was trying to keep it from getting out of control and being drawn at all!

Ugh! The pressure! All the staring! Muramasa not behaving! My stomach couldn’t take this!

“My, but you certainly are dignified, aren’t you, young Crow?” someone whispered from below, to my left.

Next to me walked Eldia von Lemuria, the white-haired loli empress dowager, clutching my arm very, very, very tightly.

But why?! Wasn’t she the emperor’s mama?! She should’ve been with her son, then!

Also, why was she leaning so close to me?!

“Eldia, should you not be at the emperor’s side?” I asked. “Won’t seeing us like this cause confusion?”

She chuckled. “Ah, it’s far too late to worry about that. Rather, I should’ve given up on him long ago. I gave him too many chances, believing he could change, and it nearly cost you your life as a result,” she said as she looked up at me apologetically.

It nearly cost me my life? I echoed in my head. *Oh, yeah, the dragon thing. That was the emperor’s fault.*

Indeed, because of that, my internal organs were now held together by Muramasa, and I could no longer live as I had before.

Still, she didn't need to worry about that, I thought.

"I'll watch over your life from now on, Crow, until the end of your days. This I swear," the empress said.

Wait, she was going to do *what*? Watch over me for the rest of my days?! Could she tone down on the sense of responsibility a little?!

I was fine! Fine, I tell you! Also, it was the emperor's fault, not his mother's!

"Please, don't worry about it, Eldia. It's all on your son's shoulders. You shouldn't torment yourself anymore over this. Allow yourself to simply be a woman and find your happiness."

I mean, she was a really pretty girl!

Sure, yeah, she kinda looked a little too young, but surely *someone* would want to marry her. Right?

She should find that someone and be happy! I thought.

"Oh, Crow," Eldia said. "You're far too kind. I'm already an old lady, you see."

"Hah, it's never too late," I told her, like the considerate man I was.

So considerate, in fact, that I wanted to boost her confidence. I couldn't just leave her thinking that an old lady like her couldn't find a new husband!

"You're quite beautiful. What man wouldn't count himself lucky to take you as his bride?"

"Huh?!"

Aw, she blushed! She must've been really happy!

See, I was shy and tongue-tied, but when it came to women like Iris and Eldia, worlds apart from me, way out of my league, I could be quite smooth! Cheesy, even!

"I swear to you, my beautiful lady, that I will protect you for as long as I draw breath." Yes, I would protect her as her knight!

"Hwah?!"

“So please, smile. I, Crow, shall be by your side always,” I said, in a voice loud enough for the surrounding crowd to hear. Yes, I would be by her side as her knight!

“Wha-huh?!”

Everyone around us was like, “Wow!”

Hah! A perfect strategy to cheer Eldia up while winning the people's favor! Look at them, all happy with me. I mean, for now, anyway.

The second some nobody like me started talking shit about the emperor, they'd all definitely be like, “Ugh!”

And that, you see, was why I wanted to get people to like me, even if just a little bit. I could upgrade my image from “some nobody” to “some gentleman-nobody who respects women” and do some damage control that way! Hah!

“Oh, what sweet words Crow just said!” someone in the crowd remarked. “Why, if *I* were a maiden at heart, in a position where I had failed at raising a child after a loveless marriage and had been suffering alone, those words would've been super effective! My ovaries might've exploded!”

“Hey, isn't that beautiful girl he's smooth-talking Eldia, the empress dowager? She might look like that, but she's the emperor's mother!” someone else chimed in. “See, medically, a woman's brain is wired to increase sexual desire with age right up until menopause, right? So by that same token, the empress, whose age kept increasing without ever hitting menopause, should have the greatest libido in all of human history! Being flirted with like that by a young man would turn her brain into a uterus!”

“He's not even being subtle!” a third person exclaimed. “He's straight-up establishing his dominance in front of everyone! What a chad!”

What the hell were they all going on about? “Is this a measure to increase the birthrate?” “Look at Her Majesty's face! That's a *writ of summons* if I've ever seen one!” “They're about to get some *international exchange* going, if you catch my drift.” Like, what?

Hrm. Guess they must've misunderstood me.

I was just being nice to her! She was a royal, and I was a knight!

There was nothing romantic to it!

Ugh. Seriously. Why did extroverts have to turn anything and everything under the sun into a love story? It made me want to inject some of my shy genes into their spines.

“Goodness, these bystanders are getting on my nerves,” I grumbled. “I’m not comfortable with the idea of them taking our relationship as something superficial.”

“Oh, yes, that’s rather a problem, isn’t it? ♡ Our relationship is certainly not so superficial anymore, is it? ♡” Eldia cooed.

She leaned further into me. Okay, but why, though?

Also, her body was burning up! She wasn’t a little red, she was bright pink! The skirt of her dress was dripping with sweat! Did she have a fever?!

She’d come with me to the ceremony in that state, just to offer me moral support?!

Wow! I could see why she was my angel Iris’s mentor! The purity in her heart was overflowing!

She got 100 Crow points! At 500, she could exchange them for my underpants! (Not that she’d want to.)

“I see,” I said. “In that case...”

The woman next to me, despite her illness, had my best interests at heart. There was only one thing I could do to curry favor with the people! I stopped right where we were, and—

“Here you go,” I said, sliding an arm under her legs and another around her back, lifting her up to my chest.

There we go! Now she doesn’t need to walk around while sick!

“E-Eeeeeep?! ” she squeaked. “Y-You’re carrying me bridal-style?! In front of everyone?! Crow!”

Bridal-style? What? I’d never heard of that. Must be a city thing.

Pushing that thought aside, I kept walking with her in my arms.

“Crow! Everyone’s watching!” she exclaimed.

“Heh, there’s no need to be shy, Eldia. It’s my duty to support you whenever you’re in distress or in pain.” Yes, it was my duty as a knight!

“Ohhhhhh! ♡”

The empress made a noise for some reason. The crowd squealed for some reason.

It was only natural to care for a sick girl, no? Was there really a need to kick up a fuss over it?

Anyway, this was bound to make people like me!

Off to the emperor we go! Hardy har har! “Let us go,” I said. “We have a child to scold.” Meaning the emperor, naturally.

“Yesh! ♡”

“So, like, someone in the front row said that Crow brazenly took Her Majesty and—”

“Whaaat?! You’re kidding! Holy crap, that guy’s something else!”

The voices of the crowd behind the thin cloth of the curtains were really grating on the emperor’s ears.

“Oh, shut up already,” Zilsonia muttered, sighing. This was why he didn’t like attending public events.

The public commendation ceremony had been set up parade-style, with Crow Titus slowly making his way toward the central square of the imperial capital. There, the emperor sat under a tent, awaiting the young man at the end of the red carpet.

Zilsonia chuckled. “Hurry now, little hero. I’ll sing your praises all you want today,” he murmured, grinning wickedly as he twirled his golden scepter between his fingers.

Yes, today he would shower the filthy commoner with all kinds of praise. He would be generous. He would smile. He would excuse any and all rudeness, no matter how much he hated it. And he would do it all with a friendly smile.

And then the next chance he got, when Crow Titus’s guard was

down...

"I'll melt you down with my scepter's power, just like I did to that useless minister!" he said, laughing as he fantasized about the moment the thorn would finally be plucked from his side.

Before long, the time of his encounter with his greatest enemy arrived. From beyond the thin curtains, the shadow of a man approached. Cheers echoed around him as the people gathered around the square grew excited.

Monkeys, all of them, thought the emperor.

"Oh man, oh man!" someone exclaimed. "It's the legendary Crow!"

"Wow! I was curious what kinda hero the Dragonslayer was, but this is even better than I imagined!"

"Shit, man, I've never been so glad to have paid my taxes! This is the best use of public funds I've ever seen!"

Zilsonia found their enthusiastic prattle irritating. He'd heard Crow Titus was a handsome man, but this amount of fuss was ridiculous.

"Hmph! How far the citizens of the capital have fallen," he muttered. Maybe he'd implement policies to favor the elite once this all blew over, and eliminate every last commoner who'd ever annoyed him.

Starting, of course, with one man in particular.

"Time to get a good look at your face, you worthless insect!" he declared, standing up from his chair. Normally, getting up for a commoner would have been awful, but not today. Today was special.

Putting on his best false smile, the emperor emerged, taking center stage.

"Hail, Crow the Dragonslayer! I bid you welcome!" he boldly declared, shifting his gaze to look directly at the young man. It was time for their showdown—

—which ended as soon as he realized what he was looking at.

"Oh. Oh, darling... ♡ I'm having trouble staying on my feet. My legs are so weak... ♡" Eldia cooed.

“I see. Then I shall continue to hold you as I speak to the emperor,” Crow said. *Wow, she must be feeling really sick.*

It was an astonishing spectacle indeed.

Beyond the curtain stood Crow Titus. And cradled in his arms, with hearts in her eyes, was the emperor’s mother, Eldia.



“Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” The emperor gave a strange shriek before dropping to his knees.

He felt as if he’d been punched in the brain, his consciousness quickly devolving into a blurry mess.

Alas, the outcome of their showdown had been set in stone.

The man who had taken the lives of so many peasants was served the ultimate revenge as a commoner NTRed his mother.

As fate would have it, however, he was not defeated. Not yet.

“Watch out!”

As Zilsonia began to fall over, his consciousness fading, he felt an arm supporting his back. The strong, warm grip reminded him of his father.

“Oh, father,” he murmured for the first time in decades, as he opened his eyes.

“Your Majesty, are you all right? Oh, my apologies, I should call you Zilsonia, shouldn’t I?”

Before the emperor stood the loathsome Crow Titus, looking down at him at an extremely close range. The empress dowager was still in the young man’s arms.

And that was the moment Zilsonia noticed it—on the fourth finger of Crow’s left hand was the royal family’s ring.

“Now then, Zilsonia. I will scold you in place of your father,” Crow announced, sending the crowd into a frenzy. The royal retainers, lined up by the tent, were similarly stunned by the young man’s words and the treasure adorning his finger alike.

That could only mean one thing.

As if to confirm this, Eldia smiled at her dumbfounded son, saying, “Now, now, Zil. Let your new father scold you! ♡”

Thus did the emperor come to know that Crow had burrowed his way into the royal family.

“Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Chapter 48: Imperial Contrition

Up until this point, the empire's high-ranking officials had dutifully followed the emperor, carrying out his tyrannical orders against the common folk with a smile.

That was how they'd curried favor with him, after all. They had shared some of Zilsonia's authority, and therefore had no reason to care about the suffering of the hoi polloi.

If the emperor said he couldn't stomach a particularly talented painter who was not of noble blood, the artist's arm would be maimed in a mysterious "accident."

If he called an unusually skilled scholar of common stock an eyesore, they would be pressured from all sides into leaving academia.

Twenty years ago, they'd even crippled two skilled knights for the same reason.

They hadn't at all been afraid of getting their hands dirty. Commoners couldn't retaliate, given that the officials had been under the protection of the emperor's absolute authority. Or so they'd been convinced.

But now they trembled in terror, despairing before Crow Titus's counterattack.

"That madman!" one exclaimed.

"We're doomed," another lamented.

"Eeeeeek!" shrieked a third.

The man on whose back Zilsonia had painted a target had, incredibly, managed to seduce the emperor's own mother, Empress Dowager Eldia.

Not only that, he had established his claim over the enamored Eldia in front of hundreds of thousands of people, carrying her before the emperor himself.

"What a terrifying man this Crow Titus is!"

The officials' hearts shattered at this unbelievable turn of events. After all, who would want to cross someone who'd not only seduced an elderly mother, but even got her visibly thirsty in the middle of the city? No, he was far too terrifying.

Even should the emperor demand Crow's elimination in the future, they would all vehemently refuse. The officials spoke excitedly among themselves.

"Look at Crow's—no, Lord Crow's left hand!"

"That is undoubtedly the royal family's ring!"

"If Her Majesty gave that to him herself..."

At this point, politically speaking, Crow Titus was invincible. Having been chosen as the consort of the empress dowager meant he was now a member of the royal family—and Emperor Zilsonia's stepfather.

Even not being of royal stock wasn't enough of a drawback. In today's world, powerful aetherborn ran rampant, and due to the recent attack by the Order of the Black Star, Wanpurgis, they had breached the Spirit Wall and begun to advance inland. Now even the complacent inhabitants of the capital were forced to remember that humanity was still in crisis.

Thus, what the royal family needed the most at this moment was overwhelming military power—and a charismatic warrior on whom the people could count to protect them at all costs was a necessity.

"The current royal family, His Majesty the Emperor included, has no real combat experience. Whereas Crow Titus..."

They all knew that Crow was the sole disciple of Iris of the White Blade, vice-captain of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights. That his origins were tragic—he'd become a knight due to the rage he felt at the destruction of his hometown, raided by a dark magus. That as a "myth conqueror," he could not be corrupted by cursed arms. That Crow was on record as having taken part in the defense of Salem, the only city that had withstood Wanpurgis's terrorist attack on the Four Cardinal Cities. And lastly, that he was a legend, having single-handedly slain one of the Seven Calamities that had long plagued humanity—Nidhogg, Blight of the Heavens.

He was perfect.

Far too perfect.

Frighteningly perfect.

What good was royal blood compared to this man's achievements? Anyone who complained about his pedigree only exposed how petty they were. After all, the current royal family and nobility had achieved their greatness not by merit but by riding on the coattails of their ancestors' deeds, their victories against the aetherborn. In light of all this, no one could really object to Crow entering the royal family.

On the contrary! Upon realizing that a commoner had become a royal, the people rejoiced, erupting into explosive cheers.

“Wh-Whoa! Does that ring mean what I think it means?!”

“Oh my gosh! Crow's a royal now!”

“Oh shiiiiiiiit!”

Seeing him that close to Eldia already had them going like, “No way!” But then Crow had shown the emperor his ring, and the empress dowager had uttered the words “your new father” and boom! The people's hopes became reality!

“Hooray! Long live His Majesty, Emperor Crow!” the (out-of-the-loop) crowds shouted in joy.

The Dragonslayer, a commoner just like them, had made the career leap of the century! It stood to reason that they were excited.

Even just in terms of practical benefits, a powerful emperor was a welcome addition. With aetherborn and dark magi running rampant of late, people had been quite frightened, so they were all the more elated at this new development.

So, though the high-ranking officials were terrified at the thought that Crow had joined the royal family, the ordinary people were beside themselves with excitement.

Indeed, everyone completely and fully believed that Crow Titus had married Empress Dowager Eldia.

Crow himself, though?

Um, what?! Uh, they all kinda have it all wrong!

On the outside, he remained stoic. Internally, he wanted to cry.

He'd said that he would scold the emperor in place of his father, yes, but he'd meant this quite literally. He hadn't meant to say that he was going to *be* Zilsonia's new father.

And he'd slipped the ring onto his left ring finger because Eldia had said that, if he was going to act in place of the emperor's father, he should be wearing it during the ceremony.

Aaaaargh! Why'd Eldia have to go and tell me to put the ring on, and be all like, "Here's your new dad" at the emperor?! Now everyone has the wrong idea!

Or at least, that was why he *thought* everyone had the wrong idea. In reality, she hadn't intentionally misled anyone. Eldia genuinely wanted to marry Crow to bring stability to the nation.

And she believed he was on the same page.

Oh, Crow! she thought, unaware of the young man's inner turmoil. *You're so dutiful to your nation, offering yourself up to someone like me! I will cherish you for the rest of my days! ♡*

Eldia sincerely respected him. And just as she'd hoped, the citizenry had accepted Crow as a new member of the royal family. With this, making him the new emperor would be trivial, she thought.

Nor was she alone in thinking this.

"W-We'll gladly support Lord Crow as well!" said the high-ranking officials, doing a one-eighty and joining the people in cheering.

Having witnessed the young man's terrifying plot to publicly NTR an elderly mother, they'd become fearful of him. And after seeing the crowds' reaction, they decided to side with him outright.

"Protect our country, Emperor Crow!"

The masses, in their ignorance, continued to celebrate.

Though the masses were easily swayed by fleeting emotions, they were also pragmatic and cruel. Their consensus was that, compared to the powerful and gallant Crow Titus, the emperor was a pathetic old man, making funny noises as he fainted. Rumors also abounded of Zilsonia's hatred for the common folk, and who in their right mind

would love an emperor who hated his own people?

As their distaste for the emperor grew, public opinion flipped entirely in Crow's favor.

And so, the high-ranking officials turned traitor, the people cheered, Eldia had nothing but respect and affection for the young man, and Crow himself was in the middle of nervously going, *Now what? Now what?!*

Zilsonia, now bereft of all support, gripped his staff tightly.

Damn you, Crow Titus!

With anger in his heart, the emperor stood up. Between the shock of his mother being snatched away and the painful stares from those around him, he was in such anguish he wanted to cry.

But one thing kept his heart from breaking—the golden scepter in his grip.

That's right. I still have this. It can dissolve living beings. I must persevere! I will endure this humiliation and wait for my opportunity to kill Crow! The emperor clenched his teeth, desperate to suppress his rage.

This was all to eradicate Crow once and for all.

He would swallow this brain-shattering humiliation and endure this disgraceful ceremony. He would endure this man stealing his elderly mother away. Zilsonia wanted to snap, to cry, to retch, but he poured every fiber of his being into holding back.

"My sincerest apologies, Crow!" he exclaimed, bowing his head dramatically.

At the emperor's gesture and words, Crow's eyes widened.

"Zilsonia?" the young man asked, frozen in shock. *What? What?! The emperor apologized?! Huh?! Even though, from his point of view, I may as well be NTRing his mom?!*

Without a moment's hesitation, the emperor continued the charade. "With a pathetic son like me, it's no wonder my mother would entrust her heart to you!" he said, letting crocodile tears flow.

And Crow, gullible idiot that he was, fell for it.

“I see. So you’re aware of how things stand,” the young man remarked. *Seriously?! Aw, he’s so understanding! We just needed to have a chat!*

Internally, Crow was relieved.

Originally, when he’d heard he was to reprimand the emperor at the ceremony, he’d fretted, *Oh man, he’s gonna be so mad at me!*

Then, on the day of the scolding, Eldia had said something misleading and had ended up being mistaken for Crow’s fiancée. Crow’d been shaking in his boots, thinking he’d *definitely* get in trouble.

But look at what had happened instead! The emperor that he’d been so terrified of had bowed his head low in front of everyone!

Crow was so impressed he couldn’t help but go *Bravo!* at the older man’s sportsmanship.

“Let’s set aside the matter with Eldia for now,” the young man said. “Zilsonia, by apologizing, are you acknowledging you tried to have me assassinated?”

“Indeed. I am man enough to face my guilt head-on,” the emperor said, further impressing Crow by not dodging his question.

See, the young man’s thought process was so flimsy that, when directly confronted with what looked like remorse, he thought, *Well, guess I’ll forgive him!*

If Crow had been the angry sort, he’d have been more like, *Do I look like I care? Shut up. I’ll kill you.*

But he wasn’t. He was meek. The worst kind of meek.

“Is that so? Zilsonia, you seem to grasp the error of your foolish ways,” Crow announced, relieved on the inside. *Wow! Genuine repentance!*

“Y-Yes! I am but a foolish criminal,” Zilsonia replied, seemingly apologetic.

How dare you call me foolish! he thought, seething on the inside. *I’ll destroy you, bastard!*

Thus did their high-stakes yet ultimately pointless psychological

warfare begin.

Coming up, in the final chapter of Volume 2...

Oblivious Dumbass, NTRer of the Elderly

vs.

Garbage Old Man!!!

Let the trash battle from hell commence!

Chapter 49: The Astonishing Vortigern

The conversation between Crow and the Emperor left the crowd flabbergasted. Unbelievably, Zilsonia had publicly confessed to trying to kill the young hero! Long had the people believed that commoners whose deeds reached the royal palace would eventually suffer grave injuries—and though they couldn't openly discuss the matter, rumor had it that the emperor was the one behind these happenings. Now he'd just admitted to being the wicked ruler of unscrupulous methods that everyone had always known him to be.

Naturally, folks were furious.

“Are you fucking shitting me?!”

“What the hell?! What have you *done*?!”

“Eat shit and die, Zilsonia!”

Countless insults echoed across the imperial capital, the echo of the people's anger and deep resentment. The fear of being charged with a crime receded into the backs of their minds.

Inwardly, the emperor was growling. *Fuck them! How dare these lowly bastards insult me! Damn it! This is why I didn't want to speak about it publicly!*

Even he, bitter old man that he was, understood that it was all over. With this much animosity from his people, he'd have no choice but to step down. He could no longer avoid his fate. Nevertheless...

I'm prepared! I don't care about the throne anymore. All I want is to destroy Crow Titus! he thought, clasping his golden scepter.

He was not a stupid man. Given the absolute popularity Crow boasted after marrying Eldia—a royal—Zilsonia already knew the result: he would be dethroned, and Crow would take his place. So the emperor had preemptively given up his throne, his dignity...all he had.

He asked for only one thing in return. *I'll earn your trust, Crow Titus. And then, when you least expect it, I'll end your miserable life!* Bracing

himself, the emperor faced his people. *Here we go!*

In one dramatic, swift motion, he dropped to his knees and bowed down low.

“My people! I beg your forgiveness!” *Fuck all of you!*

His prostration was truly exemplary, and he lay still as a statue after a vigorous bow of his head.

The people murmured, at a loss over his resolute behavior. Their arrogant, wicked emperor was groveling in a splendid, heartfelt display of contrition. (He was actually in a murderous rage, but whatever.)

The string of insults involuntarily died away. Between their confusion and the faint admiration rising within them, they’d all but forgotten to continue screaming angrily.

“Crow Titus!” the emperor announced. “And all of you, the hundreds of thousands of people of the imperial capital! Behold this old fool! Feel my repentance! I truly, truly beg your forgiveness!!!”

At these words, a typical bystander might have mused thus: Imagine being over fifty years old and having such high societal status, and still bowing your head in front of such a large crowd. Embarrassing, surely? It would make one want to die, no? Or at least weep, no doubt. What courage it must’ve taken to do so, especially before hundreds of thousands of people! Why, said bystander certainly couldn’t have done so!

“I beg your forgiveness! Verily! Forgive me, everyone! I know this hardly makes up for all I’ve done, but I beseech you, take solace in my disgrace!”

Most grown men would have balked at the idea of behaving in this way, and yet here was Emperor Zilsonia giving it his all.

“Forgive me!”

An apology could hardly atone for the deeds of such a wicked man. But how many wicked men would be able to honestly repent like this?

“Your Majesty...!”

“What are you...?”

“Well, shit...”

At the emperor’s desperate apology, as he cast aside his sense of shame and his reputation, many found themselves moved. Plenty of rulers in history had committed tyrannical acts, but how many had displayed the humility and courage to apologize to their people? How many had gone so far as to prostrate themselves?

They couldn’t forgive him—not fully—but not a single person in the crowd could ridicule his remorse. Once filled with shouts of resentment, the plaza now fell silent at the sight of the emperor’s sincere contrition.

But, of course, he was neither sincere nor contrite—not even the tiniest bit.

“I beg of you, sear the image of this foolish old man into your memory!” he yelled, but at the same time, he declared to himself, *You’re all trash! Every last one of you! I’ll crush all your eyeballs someday!*

Yes, internally, the old tyrant was flipping his shit.

He’d already been on the brink of losing it when his elderly mother had been publicly NTRed during the parade. Now, prostrated in front of the people, he was pushing the limits of human wrath.

Tears of rage spilled forth, and he sobbed loudly. *I hate this! I hate everything!*

The unknowing public, however, misinterpreted his cries of anger. There was no way that could be an act, they thought. The emperor *had* to be truly regretful.

And, of course, there was one other naive idiot present taking this all in.

“Oh, Zilsonia!” *Yo, whaaat? The emperor’s such a nice guy!!!* Crow’s five brain cells fully believed in the old tyrant. *Wow, he’s amazing! He’s like, ancient, but look at him grovel! Not everyone would be able to do that!*

Admiration crept its way into the young man’s tough-as-nails expression.

Crow—who up until now had been at the mercy of his abusive

boyfriend Muramasa—greatly admired anyone capable of showing contrition, even if that person *had* just tried to kill him.

“You have made your feelings known, Zilsonia. Raise your head!” Crow said, out of consideration for the old man. It would’ve been the ultimate humiliation for someone in his fifties to continue to prostrate himself like this, after all.

The older man, however, refused. “I mustn’t!” he exclaimed. “I have yet to fully convey my remorse!” *Don’t interfere, Crow! Feel my remorse! Feel it more! Trust me! Then fuck off and die!*

Instead of getting up, the old bastard began to bang his head on the ground. There was nothing he wasn’t willing to do if it meant crushing this young man! He knew his time was short, so he behaved with maximum recklessness.

“S-Stop that, Zilsonia!” Crow said in horror. “You’ll crack open your skull!”

“Aaaaaargh!” the emperor cried out. “Chastise me, Crow! Insult me!!!” *And diiiiie!!!*

“Zilsonia!!!” *Wow, what a great guy!!!*

Utter chaos reigned.

Between the Elderly Mother NTR Parade and the prostrate old tyrant drumming the ground with his face, the masses’ excitement was reaching a fever pitch.

“Whoa! The emperor’s smashing his head open while apologizing! How remorseful he must be for what he did to Crow!”

People were almost dancing to the beat of the old man’s brains.

“Oh! Oh, Zil! My beautiful son!” Her voice choked with emotion, Eldia joined the chorus.

The crowd was now moved to tears at the sight of the elderly mother’s joyful reaction to her hopeless fifty-something son’s change of heart.

Who could’ve possibly imagined witnessing such an incredible performance live, after all? No one, that’s who! No matter how convenient and moving such a tale might be, there was no way such a

twisted, middle-aged, hateful bastard could change his ways!

Yet such a miracle—as if from a fairy tale, yet too absurd for fiction—was taking place right before the eyes of the people.

Except, as we know, the emperor was still as furious as ever.

“Oh, Zil, my Zil!!!” exclaimed Eldia. *I never thought the day would come when you’d see the error of your ways!*

“Please forgive me, mother!!!” *Screw you, you thirsty old bitch!*

To those who didn’t know the truth, however, the moving scene between the royal mother and son felt so beautiful it could cure depression, and naturally it drew cries of “Congratulations!” from the people.

“Crow!” Zilsonia exclaimed. “You’re acting in place of my father, yes?! Then scold me! Chastise me!!!”

“Oh, yes! Of course, Zilsonia!!!” Crow replied. “You’re complete and utter trash!!! I can’t understand why you’d waste masks and aethereal arms on assassins instead of using them for national security!!!” *Will this do?!*

“Thank you! You’re absolutely correct!” *Shut up and die!*

“Oh! Oh, Zil!!!” Eldia exclaimed. “Oh, Crow!!!” *We’re such a happy family!*

Thus, all at once, the imperial capital was swept up in an emotional storm.

We had the emperor, Zilsonia, inevitably on the path to dementia after his head drum solo.

Then we had the wounded Empress Dowager Eldia in a wild frenzy at the sight of her son (while in the arms of a young man).

And lastly, said young man, and the reason for Zilsonia’s show of contrition. The author of this touching scene, young father and hero Crow.

The crowd erupted in a standing ovation for all three of them. Cries of approval echoed amid the applause.

“Hey! Your Majesty! Behave, a’ight?!”

“Aw, good for you, Empress Eldia!”

“Long live Emperor Crow!”

Mere days ago, the land had swirled with fear of monsters and dissatisfaction with the royal family. Now it was fully steeped in the warm fuzzies, toward both this heartwarming scene and the future.

But one man was muttering in a daze. “Inconceivable. Unacceptable. Unthinkable...”

Staggering, the man hobbled toward Crow and his little family. One of the knights who stood guard nearby, seeing the man’s addled state, gripped his shoulder.

“Hey. Stop!” the knight commanded.

“Out of my way,” the man snapped, suddenly striking the knight’s head.

A sickening crunch rang out. As if struck by a meteor, the knight was pulverized where he stood, laid low by a single blow. Barely a stain remained on the ground.

“Eeeek!” All at once, the crowd’s excitement gave way to fear, and the people froze at the sight of the man with sooty blond hair who had killed a knight for no discernible reason.

That man was getting on in years, but his striking features suggested he’d been handsome once.

“You!” Crow’s wife, Eldia, exclaimed in astonishment.

Crow’s son, Zilsonia, was trembling in fear. “It cannot be!”

“Well, hello there,” said the man. “It’s been twenty years, mother. Brother.”

The man with sooty blond hair was a member of the royal family too, after all.

“It’s me! Your long-lost family! Vortigern von Lemuria!” he said, gesturing at the seven-pointed star badge attached to his black clothing. “And current leader of the terrorist organization Wanpurgis, the Order of the Black Star.”

“What?!” mother and son both exclaimed in unison.

“Who could’ve imagined I’d ever have a new father, hmm?”
Vortigern said to the trembling, terrified duo.

A few moments earlier...

“I’m marrying Crow! ♡” said Eldia.

“What?!” said Zilsonia.

“What?!!!” said the final boss from the other side of the story.

And they’ve all been trembling since.

Chapter 50: Goodbye, Emperor!

“Vortigern! You—!”

“Hello, big brother. We’ve both certainly aged, haven’t we?”

Zilsonia froze before the sooty blond. His ailing old mind, battered by the previous drumming, went blank. After all, his missing brother *had* without warning emerged from nowhere and claimed to be at the helm of the organization of dark magi.

“Cat got your tongue?” Vortigern asked. “Unsurprising, given that the brother you thought you’d killed has suddenly appeared before you.”

“Urk!” went Zilsonia.

All at once, the atmosphere around the imperial capital began to change.

The people, confused, began to ask, “Killed?!” “Hadn’t Prince Vortigern died in an accident?”

Empress Dowager Eldia lowered her head.

And clueless country bumpkin Crow, stoic as ever, went, *Huh? Wha...?* as a giant imaginary question mark floated above his head.

“Sorry for the ruckus, everyone,” Vortigern announced. “Like I said, my dear brother here tried to kill me. Twenty years ago, in fact. Apparently, he didn’t like that I went around being good at things while having commoner blood in me. It was really sudden, you know. He colluded with his closest noble allies, and sent a whole lot of assassins after me, his own little brother! So, Zilsonia, what did our mother tell you about what happened next?”

“She said you’d died,” the emperor replied. “She even showed me your corpse...”

“Just a little white lie. I was only her stepson, but still she was kind to me,” Vortigern revealed with a smile. “Since you were a prince at the time, you didn’t know about the secret escape route, did you, my dear brother? Only the emperor and his spouse would’ve known. Mother showed me it and helped me flee to the outer zone.”

“What?! Then that corpse—”

“My poor body double,” Vortigern explained, his voice tinged with anger. “What a kind soul he was, willingly dying for my sake!”

At his hateful tone, the knights—having just witnessed one of their own brutally beaten to death—came to life, trying to subdue him as a group. All was in vain, however.

“A job for you, my men!” Vortigern announced.

“Yes, Lord Vortigern!” Three shadowy figures descended as one upon the guards, obliterating them in an instant. Some were crushed, some burned, and some stabbed countless times.

At the sight of the blood and chunks of flesh scattering everywhere, the civilians screamed.

“Oh, whoops!” Vortigern laughed flippantly. “Looks like I caused another ruckus. My bad, everyone. But hey, you know, I lead an evil organization now and all, so you’ll have to forgive me.”

The three shadowy figures dropped to one knee before him.



“Allow me to introduce you. These three are part of the Seven at the top of the Order of the Black Star. Here’s Girag, this one’s Karen, and there’s Nya,” he said, as if naming old friends.

One was a giant man, the next a beautiful woman covered in burn scars, and the third a small, gray-haired girl. Their murderous aura

and piercing, hateful gazes were so horrific even the emperor shuddered.

“You better prepare to die, fucker!”

“Long time no see, Your Trashesty!”

“We have come to kill our enemy. And you too, Crow Titus, for getting in our way.”

The once-excited atmosphere of the imperial city had quickly become heavy with fear. (Crow still looked sharp despite nearly shitting his pants, though.)

“Uh-oh. Looks like you’re not very popular, big bro,” Vortigern mocked. “See, I wanted to make a spectacle out of your people talking shit about you. And then you’d rage, and clap back, and people would finally snap and torment you to death. That’s what I wanted to see. But sadly...”

His eyes narrowed, and he glared scornfully at the man standing next to the emperor—Crow Titus.

“*This asshole right here just had to try to keep my brother in line. Wonder why that is?*”

“Hmph,” Crow snorted, but his heart nearly stopped from shock. *Whaaat?! Here he’d been just standing around, going all, Damn, that escalated quickly*, watching the whole thing unfold. Now he was getting yelled at by some guy he’d never even met! Obviously, his flea-sized heart was on the verge of an attack. “What are you talking about, Vortigern?” *No, seriously, what?!*

“What am I talking about?” Vortigern echoed in disbelief. “Here was my disgusting, good-for-nothing piece of trash brother, whom I’d thought beyond salvation at his age, groveling on the damn ground! How the hell was I supposed to have predicted this?!” He raised a trembling fist, completely unaware that the man before him was secretly shaking in his boots, and roared, “You really *were* a threat, in the end. You know that black dragon that beat you half to death, Nidhogg? Yeah. *I* was the one who released it.”

“What?” *Why would you do that to me?!*

It made sense that Vortigern had been involved, though. The location where the dragon had been sealed was supposed to be known

only to the rulers of the country. But rulers were still just human. No matter how hard they tried to hide information, a prince—as someone very close to those in charge—could inevitably uncover some of their secrets.

“I only learned of the seal’s location by sheer coincidence. But my father, the emperor, loved me. Under different circumstances he might’ve silenced me, but all he said was to keep my mouth shut,” Vortigern explained. “And then, it was thanks to my mother that we were able to secure a route to the inner zone to attack the Four Cardinal Cities. There’s a hidden evacuation route that leads to the outer zone, known only to royalty. We made a secret passage through there and snuck into the inner zone. Sorry, mom.”

“You...!” Eldia exclaimed.

Vortigern kept spilling out revelation after revelation. The prince, once beloved by his parents, had returned to the imperial capital as a traitor—all for the sake of revenge against his elder brother. “The attack on the Four Cardinal Cities, the dragon’s release—everything was to sow the seeds of fear into the hearts of the people and destroy the emperor,” he continued. “I didn’t just want him to die. I wanted the common people he hated so much to spit on him, to torture him to death. And then *you* had to interfere, didn’t you, hero?”

The prince-turned-traitor seethed with hatred at Crow, who had undone the revenge he’d been plotting for twenty years.

“I respect you as a man, Crow,” Vortigern admitted. “You were really impressive when you defeated that dragon. But I never thought my useless sack of shit of a brother would be inspired by someone like you. I thought my mother had completely given up on him, but because of *you*, she loves him again!”

He’d never thought things would turn out this way. The aging second prince glared at the young swordsman.

“I’ll kill you, Crow Titus!” he uttered.

“Stop this, Vortigern!” Emperor Zilsonia commanded, rising boldly to defend Crow!

“Damn you, brother!”

“Zilsonia?!” Crow exclaimed. *Aww, Mr. Emperor, sir!*

At the sight of the old man leaping to Crow's defense, Vortigern was taken aback, and the young swordsman himself inwardly wept with joy.

The people, too, were moved beyond words.

"The emperor is protecting his knight!"

"He's standing tall against this vengeful demon who wreaked havoc on our country!"

"This emperor guy really *did* turn over a new leaf!"

At this selfless act, no one could think of the emperor as an evil man anymore.

True, he might have been a criminal. If he hadn't attempted to assassinate his younger brother, quite possibly none of this drama would've happened. But the emperor had shown personal growth. He'd repented of his actions to the point of groveling and was now selflessly protecting a subordinate.

How could anyone *not* be moved at the sight of this man who had found his way back to the path of light?

And with that, Vortigern's dream of watching the emperor die despised by his people crumbled to dust.

But of course, reality was not as it seemed. Zilsonia was merely a spiteful old bastard who had reached his limits. A worthless, single-minded piece of waste. "I won't let you take Crow's life!" *He's mine! Mine, you fool!*

Not that Vortigern had any means of knowing this.

Watching his supposedly born-again older sibling, Vortigern gritted his teeth in frustration.

"Have it your way, then, brother!" the younger prince exclaimed. "You'll die first!"

In an instant, he lunged at the emperor and snatched the symbol of his authority—his golden scepter—out of his hands. With a roar, he thrust it into his brother's chest.

"Guh?!" the emperor groaned. Blood gushed forth from his mouth.

A genuine cry of grief escaped Crow's throat at the sight. "Zilsonia?!" The airheaded young man felt a deep affection for the emperor, not realizing he was just a hateful old bastard.

And then Zilsonia, pierced by the golden scepter, gradually began to dissipate.

"Aaaaaargh! I'm melting!" he screamed. *Am I going to die without killing Crow?! Damn it! I hate this! I even groveled and everything!!!*

"Huh," Vortigern exclaimed, curiously examining the aethereal arm in his hands. "I didn't know the scepter had this power. Was there ever a legendary scepter that could melt people?"

A split second later, however, he tossed the scepter aside and dodged, just barely avoiding a thrust from Crow's blade.

"You bastard," the young man hissed. "How dare you!"

For the first time, weak-willed Crow had actually swung his blade of his own volition to protect someone! (Even if that someone *was* just a piece-of-trash old douche.)

"No! Zilsonia! Don't die!" he lamented, lifting the dissolving emperor into his arms as tears of grief streamed down his face. "Zilsonia!" *You're one of the few people who's ever risked their lives to protect me!!!*

"Oh, Crow!" the emperor murmured. *Oh! Oh, I made the fucking brat cry! Yes! Yes!!!*

The hateful old bastard was overwhelmed with joy at the sight of the crying young man he hated more than anything else. No longer concerned with death, he reached out a hand to touch Crow's tears.

"Oh! You... You...!" *Let me taste those delicious tears!!! Cry more!!! Cry, you pathetic brat!!!*

"Zilsonia," Crow murmured. "Are you telling me not to cry?"

The masses couldn't take their eyes off the sight of the dying emperor, smiling at the weeping young knight. The people, too, began to shed tears, so much did the scene of the emperor's departure tug at their heartstrings.

"Zilsonia!" the hero screamed.

“Zil!!!” the mother cried out.

The people, too, joined the chorus of lamentation.

“I’ve failed. Completely,” Vortigern muttered under his breath in the face of this outcome. “Useless piece of— No, Brother, if only you’d been this way from the start...”

Vortigern’s voice held no malice as he said his final words to the fading emperor.

“Goodbye, brother,” he said, not as a man seeking revenge, but as a man bidding farewell to his older sibling.

As for said older sibling...

“Ahh...” Dammit!!! How dare you kill me, you useless excuse for a brother!!! In my next life, I’ll make you, and everyone else here, pay for this!!! I’ll kill all of you, I swear!!! This piece of shit hero, this human waste of a brother, and all you pathetic commoners too!!!

To the end, Zilsonia remained a bitter old bastard. A fact best left unknown.

Goodbye forever, stupid geezer!

Chapter 51: The Decisive Battle

“I’ve killed my brother. You’re next, Crow Titus!”

As Crow cradled in his arms the emperor’s remains, which had now shrunk so much that they lay concealed within the royal attire, he reacted too slowly to Vortigern’s raised fist. It was kind of ironic how holding the emperor’s body, of all things, was what put him in a bit of a predicament.

“Die!” Vortigern roared, brutally swinging his fist at the young man.

The blow didn’t connect, however—halted by a pure-white sword.

“Y-You!”

“I, Iris of the White Blade, have arrived!”

Like a Valkyrie, the golden-haired knight Iris descended upon the terrorist leader, intercepting his attack.

“Here comes the pest,” Vortigern spat, putting quite a bit of distance between them. His three subordinates gathered around him, doing their utmost to protect him from Iris.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Crow,” Iris said. “I was patrolling the outskirts of the capital to keep suspicious individuals away, not realizing the enemy was already among us.”

“You couldn’t have known, Iris,” Crow replied, his eyes downcast as he held what was left of the emperor. “Our enemy is a prince, with full knowledge of all of the capital’s ins and outs.”

“Oh, Crow,” Iris murmured, her heart aching. She’d never seen him in such a state.

The golden-haired knight had been patrolling the outskirts of the capital because she hadn’t wanted to see her mentor Eldia and her beloved Crow be so intimate with one another. She had resolved to not interfere with their relationship, but she still couldn’t bear to watch it unfold. And because of that, she’d almost lost Crow.

“I was running this way when I saw it from afar,” Iris said. “The

emperor, that man I thought was worthless, shielding you from the enemy.”

“Oh.” *Man, he was such a nice guy!*

“And here I thought he was a senile old bastard. People really can change.”

The reality, of course, was that he was still walking the path of hatred as his mind and life faded, but nobody knew that.

Either way, Iris had made a decision. Just like the emperor, she would embrace change with dignity. Not just within herself—she would make a vow to the man she loved.

“Crow!” she began. “I thank you for having told me you were in love with me! But...it’s all right now. Just like you got engaged to Empress Eldia to help stabilize this nation, I, too, will lay my life down and dedicate it to knighthood!”

“Oh!” *Wait, what? Huh? Whuh? Beg your pardon?! Come again?!!!*

And suddenly, Crow’s every misconception was summarily corrected.

“O-Oh?” *Huh?! When did I ever say I was in love?! Wait, does she mean back in Salem, when I told her I loved her as a mentor?!*

Carelessly, Crow dropped the emperor’s remains. He thought maybe he heard a tiny little yelp as he did, but he was far too dazed to really pay it any mind.

“Hngh,” he groaned. *Has Iris been thinking this entire time I’d confessed to being in love with her?! And she said she loved me back?! Wait, no, I mean, no! She’s, like, hella beautiful, and dating her would be, you know, holy-shit-this-is-great levels of awesome, but I mean, whaaaaaaat?!*

Crow’s face turned beet red, from embarrassment and happiness and whatever else, and his whole body shook as he continued to groan.

Seeing this, his enemies, Vortigern included, grew increasingly more alarmed. They mistakenly thought the kindhearted hero was in a state of unbridled fury.

“Urkh!” *Also, what was that she said next?! That I’m engaged to Eldia?! To stabilize the country?!*

Startled, he stared at the ring in his hand. To the enemy, however, it looked like his eyes were on the sword at his hip.

All at once, the meaning behind being given the ring, Eldia’s lovey-dovey behavior, the request to scold the emperor in place of his father—everything finally hit Crow like a ton of bricks all at once.

“Ahh...” *Did Empress Eldia seriously mean to make me a hero to reassure the masses?! Was I literally going to be the emperor’s new father?!*

As if to confirm his thoughts, the empress dowager wrapped her arms tightly around the young man.

“Please control yourself, dear! Vortigern— *Our son* is a formidable enemy! If you lose yourself to madness, you can’t defeat him!”

“Hngh.” *You gotta be kidding me!!!*

Crow’s mind was in a complete state of chaos.

Unaware of his enemy’s internal turmoil, Vortigern taunted him. “What’s wrong? Come at me, bastard!”

“You be quiet,” Crow barked, his sheer intensity immediately silencing the terrorist leader.

He wasn’t angry, though. His mind was simply overwhelmed with so many thoughts that he couldn’t be bothered to consider his foe’s existence. Finally, he was beginning to understand the complexity of the situation he was in.

“My apologies, Eldia,” the young man said. “I’m fine now. And thank you, Iris, for coming to my aid.” *Aaaaaaah! What do I do?! What do I do?!!! I can’t just tell them after all this time that I’ve been clueless about everything! What the hell was I even doing?! Iris and I confessed to one another?! I’m somehow gonna marry Eldia?! What the hell?!*

Crow kept his business face on, but internally he was a wreck, completely at a loss. Sure, he had *terrible* discernment, but he wasn’t a *total* idiot. Given enough information, he could guess what was about to happen.

A-Am I going to become the next ruler?! I mean, the emperor's dead, and I'm Eldia's fiancé! Nooo!!! I don't wanna be emperor!!! The pressure's gonna kill me! Also, poor Iris!!!

He racked his brain with everything he had. He spent a few moments thinking, thinking, thinking, and thinking to the point that steam seemed to rise from him.

Vortigern took this as a display of his fighting spirit.

“Forgive me, Eldia. I must leave the throne in your hands for a while.”

“Huh?”

Drawing his sword, Crow turned to face his enemy.

“Eldia,” he said to the bewildered empress dowager, “I understand that if I don’t become the ruler of this nation, it may never stabilize. But gaze upon these people. Do they seem desperate to you?”

At Crow’s urging, Eldia turned to look at her people. In their eyes, she saw their strong, brightly blazing wills.

“Your Majesty! Your bravery inspired me!”

“We want to walk the path of light too!”

“Hey! Prince! We get your situation sucks, but you crossed a line! We won’t let you do this!”

It was as though the soul of Zilsonia—who, ashamed of his foolishness, died a brave and honorable ruler—lived on through the people.

“Thank you, everyone!” Eldia exclaimed.

“This is the answer, Eldia,” Crow said. “Thanks to the emperor, your people have become strong. They see the evil mastermind before them. They know he needs to be stopped once and for all. Now’s not the time for me to be a ruler.”

Crow stepped forward to stand next to Iris.

“Crow!” Iris exclaimed.

“Iris, I’ll continue to live as a knight for now. And please, don’t say

you'll lay your life down. As a man who has confessed my feelings for you, I...want to make you happy, someday," the younger man said.

"What?! You... You mean...!"

Tears spilled from Iris's eyes at the sight of Crow's bashful smile. "Want to make you happy" could only mean one thing.

"Th-Thank you, Crow! When the time comes, please...love me!"

"You'll be my greatest treasure."

With this, Crow somehow managed to calm the chaos.

And then—

"Let's do this, Vortigern!" Hell yeah! Thanks, evil organization! I don't need to become emperor right now! And I can just stay war buddies with Iris for a bit! Which is great because, you know, as a certified v-card holder, I would be a total laughingstock for struggling when "the time" comes!!!

Yes, the solution Crow found was to take advantage of the presence of the enemy organization and stall for time, postponing dealing with his marriage and romance issues. What a scumbag.

Phew. Okay. I'm good for now. I should hurry and find some other guy better than me to be the next ruler, and also maybe get some experience with women! Yeah?!

Relieved though he might be, he didn't know about his little nightly visits from the pink-haired mother-daughter duo. Nor did he know that one of them was going to show up one day with a little bump on her belly. But anyway...

"Prepare yourselves, Order of the Black Star! I'll cut every last one of you down!" *Actually, could someone please survive?! Even just one person?! Help me evade my woman troubles! Please!!!*

Thus did Crow master the ancient technique of using work as an excuse to escape his relationship problems. Seriously, what a piece of trash.

If people knew that the Dragonslayer was only fighting the evil organization for this lame-ass reason, they'd all throw rocks at him and yell at him to get the hell out of their country, no doubt.

Vortigern growled. "You disgusting little... Very well, then, hero! You're next! Let's get him!"

"Yes, sir!" his three subordinates yelled in unison.

Roaring, the four of them finally began their advance.

Charging forward with such force that his footsteps cracked the very ground, Vortigern closed the distance between himself and the determined young hero in an instant, his fist raised overhead.

Still Crow did not flinch.

"Bring it on!" *"Help me out here, Muramasa!!!"*

"YOU GOT IT!"

In a flash, Vortigern's punch exploded against Crow's torso, piercing through it and splattering the plaza with copious amounts of flesh and blood.

“Got you!”

Death flowed from Vortigern’s fist. Convinced of his victory, the terrorist leader cackled wickedly at the horrific sight playing out before his eyes. The smell of blood hung heavy in the air.

But just then—

“Pathetic.”

At the sound of the hero’s echoing voice, in one swift, deadly strike, a blade mercilessly pierced Vortigern’s heart from behind.

Vortigern gasped and spurted blood as he stumbled forward. When he turned around, he saw Crow—who should have been well and truly dead—standing there, unscathed.

“What?!” he exclaimed in disbelief. “How?! I killed you! I scattered your flesh and blood everywhere!”

“That was my temporary doppelgänger,” Crow explained. “A new power I gained from my fight with the calamitous dragon you sent to me!”

Black aether overflowed from the sable blade in his hand. Crow swung the sword, scattering the darkness everywhere. It morphed and twisted, taking shape as an army of aetherborn!

“Forbidden Art: Wicked Soul Summoning!”

A thundering roar answered! Imps, ogres, minotaurs, demonic boars, oni—every man-eating beast the hero had slain thus far lined up before Vortigern!

“Wh-What?!”

Muramasa, the Black Reaper, had a new ability—manifesting the souls it had consumed. In the face of such power, even the terrorist leader broke out in a cold sweat.

Nor was that all.

“Evildoers!” a voice echoed. “I won’t let you come near Crow!”

A lightning-quick flash blocked the path of Vortigern’s three minions. The powerful battle maiden Iris overpowered them single-

handedly.

“Give up, Vortigern. As a prince, you should admit to your sins and surrender,” Crow said, pointing his sword decisively at the villain.

Inwardly, he thought, *I'm gonna be sore all over if we fight!*

What a turd.

Despite his internal bullshit, his external presence was overwhelming. Vortigern was terrified beyond measure.

“Ugh,” he groaned. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. Blood gushed from his pierced heart, and Crow’s army of aetherborn slowly closed in on him, leaving him no escape. And the battle maiden of light was keeping his subordinates at bay.

His dream of giving his brother a humiliating end had failed, and Zilsonia remained in the people’s hearts as a great man (even if he *had* been just a piece of trash old fart).

Vortigern sighed. There was no longer any hope for him. He had lost, wholly and completely. Giving up and allowing himself to face judgment was likely the easiest option.

But no.

“I’m not done yet!” he roared.

He charged straight ahead, and nothing could turn him aside! With a tremendous cry, he threw himself headlong at the massive army of man-eating beasts with wild abandon.

His fists flew everywhere, striking and punching away at the aetherborn army with brutal fury!

The sight left Crow genuinely speechless.

“What?!” *Come again?! What’s with this guy’s power?! I don’t get it! And not only that...*

The amount of blood seeping from Vortigern’s chest had decreased to a laughable pittance!

That shouldn’t have been possible. One couldn’t easily stem bleeding from the heart. If anything, it should’ve stopped only when there was no blood left to flow.

Yet the terrorist leader showed no signs of dying. His movements did not slow, and he mowed down the aetherborn one after another.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

Vortigern’s fist exploded against a massive minotaur, sending it flying toward Crow. The young swordsman cut it down instantly, but

“Behold the same tactic you used against the black dragon! I have you now, Crow!”

“What?!”

The moment Crow split the demonic bull’s torso in half, Vortigern appeared before him, his deadly arm fully taut and poised to strike.

Muramasa rose up and shielded the swordsman just in time to catch the fatal blow, sending Crow flying backward, groaning. He tore through multiple buildings in the wake of the attack’s crushing impact, and the pain was so intense he nearly cried.

Vortigern drove forward relentlessly.

“You think you can get away from me?!” he roared, his voice echoing throughout the imperial capital as he closed the distance to Crow (who was still shooting through the air) at an alarming speed, using the scattering debris of the buildings as stepping stones.

“What?!” was the only thing Crow could utter, struck speechless by his opponent’s strength, which defied the very laws of physics. *Wh-Wh-Wh-What the hell even is this guy?!*

One ogre—the sole survivor of the onslaught—still chased after Vortigern. Seeing this, Crow perked up inside. *Aw, who’s a good ogre?! Yes, you are!*

However—

“Great timing!” Vortigern announced. He paused, spun on his heel, and sank his teeth into the ogre’s neck.

And then he chewed. And chewed. And chewed. And chewed. He tore off the thing’s vertebrae, devouring them with relish as the sounds of crunching bone permeated the air.

Then he swallowed.

“Vortigern, what. The. Hell. Are you *doing?! Ewww! He’s eating it!*

Before an astonished Crow, a strange shift came over Vortigern’s body. His skin became a bright, feverish red, and his heartbeat thundered so loudly that it shook the very air around him.

He looked just like the ogre he’d just consumed.

The terrorist leader let out a deafening roar. No longer the voice of a mere human, the sound became a raging storm, pulverizing myriads of homes in its violent wake. As soon as Crow’s feet touched the ground, he was forced to retreat.

“Ngh! Vortigern! What is this power?!” *Wh-Wh-What the hell is wrong with this guy?! I have no idea what’s happening!!!*

Clearly, the man had transcended the power of ordinary mortals. Such strength should’ve been impossible for an ordinary body.

“Is this power...an ethereal arm? But I don’t see one anywhere—”

“Right here!” Vortigern bellowed, gesturing at his own heart.

With his finger, he tore at his stab wound. In one swift motion, he ripped apart his clothing, his skin, even his pecs.

“Here lies one of the nation’s treasured arms, stolen from the palace twenty years ago! Behold Fafnir, the Radiant Core!”

Deep within Vortigern nestled a bizarre heart, so swollen it filled his entire chest.

“Wh-What is that?!” Crow recoiled in horror at the sight. Even with his limited medical knowledge, he knew that a heart so large that it pressed against one’s lungs and esophagus was an abnormality.

And its size wasn’t the only strange thing about it. Like a goldfish in a tank, the shadow of a dragon swam along the surface of Vortigern’s heart.

“**GROAR!**” bellowed the shadow, glaring menacingly at Crow as it curled around the very center of the heart, where the young man’s sword had pierced through.

“This is the dragon that closed my wound,” Vortigern said, a faint sneer playing upon his lips. “Now it lives within my heart, seething at you for having stabbed it!”

“Do I look like I care?” Crow scoffed. *Find a better place to live!*

Crow mentally left the heart a one-star review for how noisy it was, claiming the sound made it difficult to sleep. He now had a general feel for his enemy’s ability.

Readying his sword once more, he returned the shadow’s glare (while freaking out internally). “They say that he who partakes in the blood from this dragon’s heart can obtain power beyond human limits.” *My friend Fukashi said that!* “Your physical prowess, your bizarre ability to absorb aetherborn... Those have all been bestowed upon you by that dragon!”

“Huh, you got it,” Vortigern said, readying his fists once more and, like the dragon, glaring at Crow. “Fafnir, the Radiant Core, was originally a piece of a dragon’s heart. Once consumed, it grants superhuman powers. In exchange, it places a curse on the person’s body, threatening to take it over if they falter.”

“What?!” *Wait, so it’s just like Muramasa?!* Cursed arms capable of taking control of the bearer’s body—Crow knew such terror all too well. Which left him puzzled now. “Are you saying you willingly consumed something so dangerous?!”

“That’s right! And for my troubles, I got all this power!” Vortigern roared. His feet shook, crushing the ground, piercing the earth beneath them in an instant as he closed in on Crow once more.

Crow wouldn’t have been able to react, save that he too was possessed by a cursed arm. Muramasa responded for him, slamming its black blade into its opponent’s deadly fist.

“Die, Crow!”

“Haaaaaah!” *Noooooo!!!*

Even Vortigern’s bone density seemed superhuman. Sword and fist collided violently, reverberating like steel against steel, the force of the clash demolishing even more nearby homes.

“Eat this!!!” Vortigern roared, clenching his fists and releasing blow after blow as the fierce battle raged.

His superhuman body unleashed a deadly barrage. He struck faster and faster, with two, four, eight, sixteen, and then thirty-two strikes per second raining down on Crow.

The younger man wasn't (outwardly) intimidated, however.

"Is that all you've got?!" Though inwardly, he was like, *Holy shit!!!*

Swinging his sword with sublime skill, he evaded and parried every last blow, defending himself and unleashing a counterattack!

A deep gash formed on Vortigern's cheek as he craned his neck.



“Not bad, hero! But I’m not losing! You cannot defeat me!” the terrorist leader bellowed as his attacks became even fiercer, even faster, again and again.

In response, the Black Reaper once more unleashed a flurry of attacks at superhuman speeds as the battle soared to divine heights!

They clashed hundreds of times per second! The deadly blade slashed at Vortigern’s flesh, while his murderous fists tore at the hero’s body! Blood danced in the air like sparks as each etched wounds into the other!

In their deadly duel, pieces of flesh scattered far and wide, dotting the ground like blossoming roses.

Their deafening roars echoed through the air. The ground itself cracked beneath the intensity of their combat, groaning at the endless maelstrom of blows.

Yet the two never faltered. Kicking at the crumbling earth, they leaped high up and clashed in midair.

To be abundantly clear, however—

“Vortigeern!!! Stoop!!! This hurts! Everything hurts!!!

The passion for fighting was restricted to Vortigern and Muramasa. Crow, a mere puppet, was about ready to start crying.

Indeed—the unreal battle that unfolded was entirely the evolved Black Reaper’s doing. The young man, as always, was being dragged along, kicking and screaming deep within his heart.

“Haaaaah!” *Come on! I’m gonna die at this rate! At the hands of some violent old fart with a giant heart, to boot! And this awful, abusive sword!*

As the clash raged on, Crow was certain his body wouldn’t last. He was, however, a mere puppet. Once the battle began, pleading with Muramasa was out of the question. The sword was salivating, in full “*DRAGON HEART! MUST BE TASTY!*” mode.

And so, there was but one thing Crow could do.

“Vortigern! Stop this pointless fighting!” *Please! Please stop! Please, dude!*

Yep. His solution was a desperate plea. All he could move while under the sword’s thrall was his mouth, after all.

“Stop fighting?” Vortigern echoed.

“That’s right! You’ve achieved part of your objective, no? You may not have tarnished your brother’s name, but you *have* taken his life!” he pleaded sincerely.

In his heart, he genuinely thought, *I don’t wanna fight anymore!* (albeit for selfish reasons), and thus his words carried such force that they gave Vortigern pause.

“The brother you loathed is gone. Is that not enough?! More violence will only harm innocents! You do not bear a grudge against them, do you?!”

Vortigern fell silent. His attacks halted. He landed on a nearby roof and stared intently at Crow.

Mercifully (or maybe not—who knew, really?), Muramasa declared, “*YOU LOOK TIRED, VESSEL. TEN-SECOND BREAK,*” allowing Crow to land on a nearby dwelling in turn.

“*Phew, thanks for the break! Wait, ten seconds?! No! I need to talk to the guy! You sit tight!*”

“Tell me, Vortigern. Your brother I understand, but why harm the people too?” Crow questioned (to buy time). “They’ve done you no wrong!”

Many had been injured and killed during the attacks on the Four Cardinal Cities and the black dragon’s release. What justification could Vortigern have had for that? Unlike Zilsonia, they’d done him no harm.

“Yeah, you’re right,” the vengeful prince admitted. “The common folk have done nothing to me. For what I did to them, I truly am sorry.”

“Then you’ll—!”

“But sadly,” Vortigern continued, “I’m not stopping.”

The next second, Crow leaped to the side—a split-second reaction from his puppeteer, Muramasa. A thunderous flash followed, and the house on which he’d been standing mere moments ago was crushed by a massive hammer enveloped in lightning.

“What?!”

“Get. Your. Hands. Off. Our. Leader!” roared the man Vortigern had introduced as Girag, one of his top subordinates.

The man was a grotesque giant, about three meters tall. Wielding his electrified hammer, he shot Crow an intense glare.

“He took me in! Fed me!” the man yelled between ragged breaths. “You hurt him, I crush you!”

“Wasn’t Iris dealing with you?!” Crow exclaimed in shock as another attack came his way.

His black sword swung itself upward, parrying the overhead attack from young Nya.

“You! You’re another of Vortigern’s—”

“That’s ‘Lord Vortigern’ to you, scum!”

While being controlled, Crow was strong. He could shake off a small girl like Nya in an instant, with no fear of damaging his muscles.

But Nya exhibited superhuman strength to rival his. She took a

second dagger into her free hand, her dual-wielding skills gradually pushing Crow back.

“Lord Vortigern is the king of the outer dwellers! Our hope and our light! We will never allow the likes of you to extinguish it!”

The sound of snapping bones echoed through the air.

They came not from the target, Crow, but from the attacker, Nya.

“Don’t tell me you’re controlling that body, pushing it beyond its limits?!” *That’s, like, basically the same as me!*

Yes, Nya’s bracelet—Tamamo-no-Mae, the Ashen Killing Stone—was her vessel, where her soul resided. In other words, her current body was nothing but a temporary puppet for the aethereal arm.

Just like Muramasa, the bracelet could control the wearer’s body as it pleased, destroying joints and muscles to unleash insane sword techniques.

“Nya! I’ll help you!” the giant man exclaimed as he drew closer, hammer in hand.

“Let’s go, Girag! We protect our king, together!”

The two fought against Crow in perfect harmony. The man’s thunderous blows threatened to sear and crush the swordsman, while the girl’s serpentine slashes weaved in through the gaps.

It was a joint effort, forged through their bonds—not as forces of evil, but as passionate friends.

Vortigern glared down at Crow as the onslaught pushed the younger man back.

“Hellthunder Girag and Nya of a Thousand Faces,” he began. “My beloved subordinates, both once on the brink of death in a cold village in the outer zone. Many like them exist within our organization.”

The outer zone—in other words, the area beyond the Spirit Wall of Berlin—was a dreadful place. Remote areas, far removed from the heart of the country, were especially bad. Few knights were ever dispatched there, and people were under attack from aetherborn day after day, constantly exposed to life-threatening dangers.

“Some get eaten alive by aetherborn, of course. But that’s not

everything. Their crops, too, are consumed, and many die of starvation. They are the sworn enemies of the people living peacefully in the inner zone—every last one of them. They all want the inner dwellers to suffer. Why wouldn't they?"

This was why Vortigern fought. He wanted to bring suffering to those who knew neither hunger nor pain, as was *his* people's desire.

"It's a king's duty to grant the wishes of his people. And my people are the comrades I met and forged bonds with in the outer zone, where I was driven, who have entrusted me with their hopes."

Vortigern readied his fist again as his fighting spirit surged once more.

"Hero, I've heard you, too, are from the outer zone. But if you insist on serving the evil emperor... If you say you'll protect the people of the inner zone..." He took another thunderous step forward, more intense and heavy than the first, shattering the building underneath it in an instant. "If you insist on getting in the way of my people's grudge...!"

As the wreckage of the destroyed building scattered, Vortigern raced across the fragments, each step stronger than the last, seeking to destroy Crow with maximum momentum—to fulfill his duty as king.

Behind him, Iris came running, shouting, "Stop!"

But before she could intervene, another female voice cut in. "You're not going anywhere, Iris of the White Blade! I will protect our king, though my heart be crushed in the process!"

Vortigern's beloved comrade, Karen of the Scarlet Blade, stood resolutely in Iris's path, wielding her two powerful aethereal arms.

"For everyone's sake," the outer king said, "I *will* end you, Crow Titus!"

Thus did the end draw near.

Taking one final powerful step, propelling himself forward, he lunged at Crow like a bullet.

"What?!" *Augh! I'm gonna die!*

Crow's situation was hopeless. As he dealt with the two warriors

charging at him, their master closed in at the speed of sound. In an instant, Vortigern pierced the air itself, lunging at Crow's chest.

Roaring, the terrorist leader unleashed his deadly fist.

Impact was coming in 0.1 seconds. Defense was no longer an option. Crow could picture death clearly in his mind's eye.

I'm dead! I'm so dead!

He's as good as dead!

Both men were convinced of Crow's impending obliteration. The ending was set in stone. One side was drowning in despair, and the other basking in joy. This was it!

Yet, just when all seemed lost—

“We won't let you...”

“...take our hero's life!”

Two battle maidens descended upon the field of combat, standing defiant in the face of impending death!

“What?!”

Vortigern's fist fell to the ground. The white-clad knight, Hypno the Crusher, had just swooped in from above, severing his entire arm with a great axe.

Then came the young genius knight, Vita von Kaambl, her violet gales sending Vortigern flying.

“My lord?!” Girag cried out.

“Lord Vortigern!” exclaimed Nya.

Shocked by their master's injury, the two pulled back from Crow and rushed to Vortigern's side as fast as their legs could carry them.

“Lord Vortigern! Your arm!”

“It's fine. Don't cry, Nya,” Vortigern grunted, staring at Crow. “Damn that man and his charm! Guess he has loyal allies besides Iris.”

The hero, too, found himself facing the concern of his two

comrades.

“Are you all right, Crow?!” Hypno asked. “I’ll protect you!”

“What are you going on about, Hypno?!” Vita snapped. “I’ll protect him!”

“I’m elated that you two came to my rescue, but please, don’t fight each other,” Crow said. *Ahhh! You guys saved meee! Also, please just protect me! I don’t care who does it!*

“Hmph!”

Notwithstanding their friendly banter, the two knights turned toward Vortigern and his subordinates, furious and on high alert.

Vortigern clicked his tongue. “I guess this is it, huh? At this rate, we won’t even be able to retreat.”

This task wasn’t supposed to have been this difficult.

His brother, Zilsonia, was hated the nation over. With rumors running wild about his attempted assassination of the hero, people should’ve cursed at him with wild abandon the second he appeared.

That was when Vortigern, as the second prince, was supposed to come in. He would’ve made a passionate appeal to the people about his own tragic assassination attempt, and the people would’ve no doubt erupted into a riot.

After all, thanks to the efforts of his shadowy organization, the Order of the Black Star, even the inner zone was overrun with aetherborn, and the people were at their limits.

Fed up with the uncertainty and fear, those within the inner zone would’ve had a reason to play right into his hands and use violence against the emperor in defense of the tragic younger prince.

Even the knights present for the ordeal would’ve been unable to fight if their opponent had been an angry public, rather than ill-intentioned enemies.

But that plan had fallen apart.

“Damn it all...”

Crow Titus was strong, kind, and honest, to the point of tugging at

even the old fool's heartstrings. Thanks to him, the emperor had died an honest man, destroying Vortigern's plan in the process.

As a result, the fallen prince had half given up and instead entered the stage as the evil mastermind himself. He'd had to assassinate the emperor personally, with help from the subordinates he'd brought along just in case. Then they'd been forced to square off against Iris, who had rushed to the rescue. And Vortigern, unable to defeat Crow, had suffered a fatal wound at the young man's hands.

"The Order of the Black Star has lost this time," he muttered, acknowledging his complete defeat.

There was no light at the end of this tunnel. They faced four formidable opponents—Crow, Iris, Hypno, and Vita—and now reinforcements were pouring in.

Even the people, whom he'd planned on manipulating, regarded him with anger in their eyes as they evacuated the area.

"It pains me, Crow, but I must retreat!" he said.

"Wait!" Crow exclaimed. *Yesssss!*

The hero, the man who'd disrupted all of Vortigern's plans, was pleased as punch that he didn't have to fight anymore, piece of trash that he was.

Unaware of this fact, Vortigern punched down at the ground with all his might. In an instant, it blew open, sending debris flying everywhere like an explosion.

"Eek!"

It was the people who suffered the most damage. Because such a vast area had collapsed in such a short amount of time, those who had been late evacuating were sucked in, the debris of shattered buildings threatening to crush them.

"You dirty—"

Iris, forcefully knocking Karen away, rushed toward the civilians in a flash of light, rescuing as many as she could.

Hypno and Vita, along with the incoming reinforcements, also had no choice but to help the populace.

“Sorry for hitting where it hurts,” Vortigern told the knights as he and his men disappeared into the haze of dust and debris. “We’re not done yet, Crow Titus! Next time I see you, you *will* be a dead man!”

“Vortigern, wait!” Crow called out. *Just go! Please! Get out!*

Thus did the day when the vengeful prince attacked come to be known as the “Crossroads of Lemuria.” As history was being written, Crow—the man at the center of it all—made a solemn vow.

“I *will* defeat you, Vortigern! This I swear!” *I nearly shat my pants! I don’t wanna be a knight anymore!*

Solemn on the outside, of course. Inside, he was spouting garbage, as per usual. The irony that such a man would be seen as a hero remained palpable.

Also, apparently, he was unable to quit being a knight.

Chapter 52: To a New Era

“Hell yeah! Another day of working hard at rebuilding!”

“With all the knights lending us a hand, we gotta put our backs into it!”

“All right, then, let’s start by clearing away the debris over there!”

Several days after the Crossroads of Lemuria, the people were toiling diligently to reconstruct the imperial capital, which had been heavily damaged by Vortigern’s inhuman powers. The people had been partly inspired by the efforts of the hero Crow, the powerful Iris, the peerless young beauty Vita, and Hypno (whose gender was *still* unknown), all of whom had taken charge of leading the work.

“Be careful, my people! Do not injure yourselves! You’re all my greatest treasure!” a young girl’s voice called out, drawing cries of agreement and appreciation from the crowd.

Indeed, she who rallied the people and instructed them on the reconstruction was an iconic figure. A new idol of the imperial capital, on equal footing with Crow and Iris.

Which is to say...

“I, Zilsonia, am with you! Lend me your strength! Let us endeavor together!” *Are you fucking shitting me?! Why do I have to break my back alongside these pathetic plebeians?!*

This beautiful young girl’s true identity was that of the old bastard Zilsonia, thought to have died!

Damn it! How did this happen?! Die, all of you! Just drop dead!

Just as her (his?) pathetic old man brains seethed, another gorgeous young girl spoke up.

“Spoken like a true former emperor, Your Majesty! You’re such a hard worker! ♡”

“Oh!” said Zilsonia. *Ack!*

To be perfectly honest, this second girl had a former identity of her

own. Her sickly-sweet tone might've sounded like sarcasm coming from an older man. In a young girl's voice, however, it seemed alluring...

"I, former Prime Minister Superbius, have fallen for you all over again upon observing your shimmering, sweaty visage, Your Majesty! ♡" *Serves you right, trash boss from hell!!! ♡♡♡ Cute little bastard!!! ♡♡♡ Choke on dust and die, please!!! ♡♡♡*

Indeed, she (he?) was Superbius, the old jerk of a prime minister who had once served under the old jerk of an emperor.

"Superbius! You have come to our aid too!" *Asshole! Don't look at me while I'm working! Die in a fire!!!*

"Of course! ♡ I, too, have turned over a new leaf, and will pour my sweat and tears into serving the people! ♡" *Anything to watch your sorry ass suffer from up close! Ha ha ha!!!*

The two young girls exchanged seemingly amiable smiles. The refreshing sight soothed people's hearts, though the hidden reality was just sordid and messy.

Their long-standing work partnership had lasted over twenty years. Having collaborated for so long, the two could insult one another with mere eye contact.

"Take my hand, comrade! Let us work hard and walk the path of light together!" *Die, die, die, die, die!!!*

"Yes! We have been blessed with a second chance at life! Let us devote ourselves to the people!" *You die! You! Die, die, die!!!*

In other words, they were both garbage. A pair of old bastards engaging in mental fisticuffs.

As for why the two girls (???) now looked like this, well, this was the doing of the golden scepter that had killed them.

"Let's do this! Together!" *Dammit! Why did even Superbius get resurrected?! Stupid scepter!*

The scepter, which Zilsonia had identified as a people-melting weapon, had a name—Tiresias, Staff of the Heavens.

In Greek myth, Tiresias was a man with an exceedingly curious

past. One time, he flippantly struck a pair of mating snakes with his staff and was consequently turned into a woman.

Incomprehensible. Childish and beyond understanding, that Tiresias.

Either way, the staff that had been passed down through the royal family could make this garbage scenario come true, since its ridiculous power was to make people who were killed by the staff reincarnate as the opposite gender.

So the dissolution of the bodies of the emperor and the prime minister had just been the first step in the process of refashioning their bodies.

“Okay! Let’s move that rubble together!” *Hurry your ass up, Superbius, you bastard!*

“Yes! Leave it to me! ♡” *Don’t boss me around, Zilsonia, you bastard!*

Thus were they reborn from a pair of turds into a pair of cute turds.

Incidentally, the emperor had told a spur-of-the-moment lie to those around him. “The moment I died, the gods appeared before me and said, ‘You have repented, and for that we will show you mercy,’ so I was allowed to be reborn!”

And then, the prime minister, who was sneakily observing the emperor pretending to be righteous, appeared and added, “I, too, have turned over a new leaf, and so they told me, ‘You as well! Live your new life with virtue!’”

And thus, the two old men, who had neither repented nor turned over a new leaf, achieved the blatantly false mythical status of “former sinners, bestowed with a divine miracle for their heartfelt wish to atone.”

Indirectly, the lies of these two (young) old bastards had improved public order. Even amidst the chaos of the imperial capital, there’d been no riots in the prisons, and all the inmates had begun earnestly seeking to repent, so that they too would be turned into cute girls. It was chaos.

Dammit! I had to grovel for my status as a virtuous man! How dare you get it with no effort!

Oh, Your Majesty, you're looking at me with such defiance in your eyes! Should I let them know you tried to kill me? ♡

Grrrr!

Despite the two having narrowly escaped death, Emperor Zilsonia was terribly dissatisfied.

Crow, whom he hated so much, had NTRed his aging mother in front of everyone. And even after Zilsonia had endured this travesty, he'd still been forced to curry favor with the young man and his people to establish his new position as a "virtuous" man.

Compared to him, Superbius hadn't sacrificed anything at all. *And* he was guilty of flippantly sending Crow after the black dragon alone.

Despite this, the former prime minister was doing just fine. Zilsonia's rage was never-ending.

Grr! I hate you, Superbius, you bastard! And now, because I turned into a child, I'm too small and my legs are too stubby and I have to work twice as hard as you! You're a teenager, aren't you?!

Hah! Probably because we've aged in reverse! Since I was a little younger than you, now I'm a little older!

Superbius smiled softly. She(?) was just happy to be alive.

It's just as I shouted when you were about to kill me. I love my son, Alithlai. Everything I did, from buttering you up to enduring in this society, was to leave my son a large inheritance and high position. And that dream came true.

With the emperor's sins having come to light, the prime minister's sins too began to surface. Accepting responsibility, Superbius had naturally resigned as prime minister.

And now his son Alithlai, a capable administrative officer, had been appointed to the position in an interim capacity.

"I will never allow my son to take part in any corrupt practices. He must become an excellent addition to the new system," Superbius whispered to the former emperor.

Zilsonia clicked his tongue. "How vexing! Why is everything going so well for you?!" he whispered back.

As the two old jerks continued their catfight, the Lemurian Empire was steadily making progress along the path of light.

Preparations for the new system, with Eldia as the ruler, were underway. Measures against the terrorist organization, Wanpurgis, were being devised.

Superbius chuckled. *I'm sure my son will be a very hard worker. And then all that will be left is for him to find a beautiful bride. He's always been a late bloomer, but hopefully he'll find love soon.*

Do I look like I care?!

Unlike the emperor, the former prime minister thought he'd gotten off relatively easily.

But the truth was not so simple. Elsewhere, a beautiful young man sought Crow's advice.

"Sir Crow. As you seem to have abundant experience with women, I would like your advice. You see, I seem to have...reacted."

"Hm? Reacted to what?" *Also, what abundant experience?!*

His name was Alithlai von Teese—the former prime minister Superbius's beloved son.

Though he was a charming young man, who at a first glance looked like a young woman, he was quite the prodigy and had a brilliant mind.

In tears, he continued. "See, my father's now a girl in her midteens, and I, um, I reacted like *that* to him!"

Crow sputtered.

"What should I do, Sir Crow?!"

How the hell am I supposed to know?!

And thus, unbeknownst to the prime minister, his son's life was being twisted in a very strange direction.

Poetic justice, in a way.

Announcing the new system!

Empress: NTRed aging mother Eldia!

Prime Minister: Little Alithlai, reacting to his father's young chest!

Favored by the masses: (Young) old jerks x2; Crow (trash); and, representing the nobility, the nightly stalker and widow, Fiana (whose period is late).

And that's that!!!

Afterword

A cute author has arriiiiiived!

Nice to meet everyone I've never met! Manzi Mazi here!!!

I'm a cute virtual Twitter girl, and I show my face and speak there! Look me up!

@mazomanzi ← This is my Twitter account! Yay!!!

Like with every other work I've released lately, I don't have time to write afterwords anymore, so I'm just gonna hastily scribble something down and add lots of exclamation marks to pad the character count!!! Which means...

This is mostly copy-pasted!!!

Copy-paste all the time every time!!!

How did you like volume two of *Make It Stop!*?!!!

It tells the story of the only-cool-on-the-outside Crow, who gets backed into a corner, then eaten by some degenerate pinks, then marries an elderly mother!!! What a loser!

Also, when *Make It Stop!* was released, a promotional video was uploaded, so please look it up!!!

Crow is played by Akabane P-sama (from *Idolmaster!*) and Iris is played by Rikako Aida-sama (from *Love Live!*). Yay!

One of the rules of the game *Othello* is that a piece caught between two others of the same color changes into that color. Which means that I, as the author of the book, am practically an idol myself!

For this reason, as an idol, in a pure and righteous manner...

I will show you my boobs! So please promote my work online!

Gross. (*edited in two days later)

Also also, to everyone who read the web novel and then bought the book too, thank you so much!!!!!!!!!! Everyone who had no idea it

existed but liked the cover or the title and bought it on a whim: it was destiny that brought us together!!! I'm a cute J-cup cat-eared virtual maid on Twitter, so if you send me a pic of the book you bought I'll go "omg onii-chan ♡" at you!!!!!!!!!!!! Please make sure you rec *Make It Stop!* to all your friends, family, acquaintances, neighborhood elementary schoolers, and random strangers in obscure internet threads in exchange for a cute little sister who's also a big tiddy maid!!!!!!!!!! Thanks!!! Post it on Twitter and I'll react!!!

And once again! I'd like to take the opportunity and thank everyone who sent me art on Twitter and bought me food from my Amaz*n wish list (aka the list of things I wanna eat before I die)!!!!!!!!!!

Takachiho Ema (Takachi)-sama, Sumeragi Natsuna-chan, Koishi Nagi-chan (sent me lotion), Ononoki Momoyasu/Sphere Geyser-sama, Masamya~san, Hadan no Otoko-san (sent me a nipple egg vibe and regularly donates!), Tawashi no Hito Hina Taguro-san, Ponkichi-san, Mugendou Haruno-san, Mentaiko Mamire-sensei (sent me tons of art!), Gafu-sensei, Iwachigu-sensei, Funyako (Poan Poan)-sensei, Asagiri Hiduki-san, Seleny-chan, Rion Shotenin-san, Sanmass-san, Haruka-san, Kuroge Wagyu-san, Lupus Sasa-san, Mirin Aji Ringo-san, Furyou Shoukou-san, ‡, 8-san, Hashire Gaiaku no Jiraigen-san (sent me my first-ever Christmas present!), Novelist Kisame-san, Pasukou-chan! (sent me tons of art!), Hairen-san, Suzushiro Daria-san, Sokin-san, Osasa-chan (sent me 8 kg of Koshihikari rice), Kouri Waka-san (sent me my first-ever fanart!), Kanenari-san, Tejima Hiiragimaru-san (sent me tons of art and a Barbatos Gundam!), Risuku-chan (sent me cash!), Izumi Kazusa-san (sent me cash!), Aonisai-chan (sent me cash!!!), S. Gashanna-chan (sent me cash!!!), Erufu no Mori no Farusonchou (elf VTuber, FWB who sent me cash!), Natsuki-chan (sent me cash and several donations!)!!!, Very Nice Meru-san, Nikoneko-chan (sent me d*ck art), Seguchi Kyousuke-kun (sent me d*ck art), Yago Eru-san (sent me a shitty flag), Oumi Mizuchi-san (sent me a shitty flag), Naka Uzuki-chan (sent me a shitty flag), ASTER-san, Grimoire Ryouhei to Kashita Ranke-san (sent me protein and training equipment), Kahen Teikou-san (gave me a pink egg vibe and a coil), oTakkTakagi-san, Koyuu Dara-san (sent me art of me getting punched), Nanairo Komachi-sama (releasing erotic CDs), Ametani Kinaco-sama, Kimagureya Shinshi-san, Okuyama Kasen-sensei (will be my illustrator someday!), Fuumin-san, Chibi Daizu-chan (sent me a *Kamen Rider* transformation item), Akatsuki Ryou-san, Uturo Kagerou-san, Gamio/Mio-hime-san, Honya no Neko-chan, Shinmei-san, ANZ-san, tetra-san, Matomenana-chan (author VTuber, attacks the people of *Narou!*), T-REX@Kimura Tatsufumi-sama, Mukiryoku Uturo-sama

(so many beef bowls!!!), Amemiya Mikuru-chan, Nekota@Nyapushiiman-san, Hokkyokugitune started playing Girls' Frontline and Kancolle-sama, Daizu no Kippa Gunshi, Kayamin-san, Jinbo Kirihiiko Yamabito-dono, Araniwa Kon-sama, Hinakaze-san, Hamada Kazue-san, Ayabe Yoshiaki-san, Gyokuro-san (created book infographics!), Yuuyake-san (YouTube reviewer. Made a video introducing my books! Everyone look it up!), Refi Raito-chan, Ahiru-chan (sent me a micro maid bikini), Mikelangelo (sent me art of me dying and laying an egg), Tsukkii-chan! (stuffy nose), Itinose Runa-chan!, Katsu-san!, Akagi Yuzo-san!, Oomichi Shuntoku-san (sent me food and drinks for my grave), Doburocky-sensei (sent me art of me with a d*ck), Aoi Youhi-chan, Kanata-chan (didn't send me anything but wanted to be mentioned so here you go), Iruka no Kairu-chan (didn't send me anything but wanted to be mentioned so here you go), Minahara Tsukasa-chan (parakeet), Nago-chan, dia-chan, Konotaro-chan, Fuuka-chan, Taniurimaru-kun, Muga-sama!!!!!!! (it's Mama!), Yukkuri Ikiru-chan, Akino Kanon-chan, Ousaka Sou-chan, Hai-ojisn (sent me love), Rana Kenaa 4-sai-kun, Asakura Plus-chan (has a girlfriend who made me on PowerPoint), Akiramen-san (congrats on the baby!), Soutaso-kun!, Toumei-chan, Hari Meguro-chan, Aratani Life Science Lab-sama, Nishimori Ajisai-sama, Agemi Sawa-chan (publicity maid! Adopted little sister! Always makes me music! Sent me money after we kissed!!!), Shieru-chan, Omoro-san, Zerokiri Yui-kun-chan, Tonsoku-chan, Hanamuke-chan (sent me a duck and a keyboard) (always makes product images for me!), Hujimaki Kensuke-san, Ssg. Aono-san, Denchuu Banjin-san!, Mizutani Akito-san!, Akinaka Tsukimi-san, Mayumi-chan (sent me over 10,000 yen worth of meat), Nakanohito-chan!, hake-san!, Aoni-chan (executive of the Dark Duelist group "Gotairo," ruling the world of *Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links* through fear), Yagami-chan, 22nd Century Schizoid Man-chan, Macchibou-chan~!, kt60-san (?!), Chin-san!, Banka Sakuko-san!, Notogawa May-chan (sent me dog food), Kiwo-chan, Tachibana Yashiori-chan, Tengen-chan, No@-chan (fellow lover of the Silverio Saga games!), Hinabi-chan, dokumu-san, Marii-chan no Marimo-chan, Shikenbunshi-san, Honwaka-chan, Yanase Akira-san, Tanabe Yukai-chan, Masami T / Satoi Guremo-chan (my Overlap kouhai!), Hitachinosuke Kankou-sensei (my Overlap senpai! (´ω`)), Gokiburi no Friends-chan (made a *Smash Bros.* stage of me with an ahagao doing a double peace sign), Iru-chan, Kusatta Tofu! Genyann-chan, Utaha@Umemura-chan (sent me art of me working in a brothel), Mishima Yukihiko (sent me art of us as siblings), Byakuya Ikuto-chan, Kotoba Asobi-san, Kyousou-chan, Kankankan-san (made my music), Kaho Hifumi-sensei!, Shinonome-chan, Yamine Yami-shan (sent me art of me trying to do paizuri), suwako-san!, Asanagi Amame-san, Gaccha-

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Thank you all so much! (If I forgot your name, please tell me what a worthless piece of trash I am! (;ω;`))

There are many others who read and spread the word about every update as soon as I post them, but I can't list you all! I'm sorry!

Lastly, I'd like to profusely thank my wonderful illustrator, Kabotya-sama, and my editors!

I wuv you! (;ω;`)

Manzi Mazi